Giant western

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW
COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

JUNE
25¢

FEATURING

RIDERS OF THE DAWN

An exciting new novel by
LOUIS L'AMOUR

THRILLING
PUBLICATION

LOOSE FALSE TEETH?

The makers of POLIDENT offer you Double Your Money Back unless this

Amazing New CREAM Holds Plates Tighter, Longer THAN ANYTHING YOU EVER TRIED

POLI-GRIP

Double Your Money Back Unless it Gives You

MORE COMFORT, MORE SECURITY THAN YOU EVER HAD BEFORE

Yes, the people who make Polident, the world's largest selling denture cleanser, are standing right behind their new adhesive cream, Poli-Grip, with an ironclad guarantee. You get double your money back, if Poli-Grip doesn't hold your plates tighter, longer than anything you've ever tried.

And that's not all. See if you don't find that Poli-Grip does all these wonderful things for you, too:

1. . . . form a cushion between your plate and gums to eliminate the friction that makes gums sore and raw.
2. . . . hold shallow lowers, despite lack of suction.
3. . . . seal the edges of plates so food particles can't get underneath to cause irritation.
4. . . . enable you to eat hard-to-chew foods in comfort, like steak, apples, celery, even corn-on-the-cob.
5. . . . give you full confidence to laugh, talk, sing without fear of embarrassment due to slipping plates.
6. hold plates tight even during strenuous sessions of coughing or sneezing.

Won't life be wonderful with all these torments behind you? Be sure to be among the first to learn the glorious comfort of holding loose false teeth tight and snug with Poli-Grip! Buy a tube at your drugstore as soon as possible.

Many tried powders, found they failed!

Read what they say about this new way:

"For ten years my teeth wouldn't stay tight for more than two hours a day. I tried powders, but nothing worked till your new *cream*, Poli-Grip, came along."
Mrs. T. W., Medfield, Mass.

"I like the cool taste of Poli-Grip and the smooth way it holds my teeth. It is easy to apply and holds tight for so long."
Mrs. L. W. N., Ottumwa, Iowa

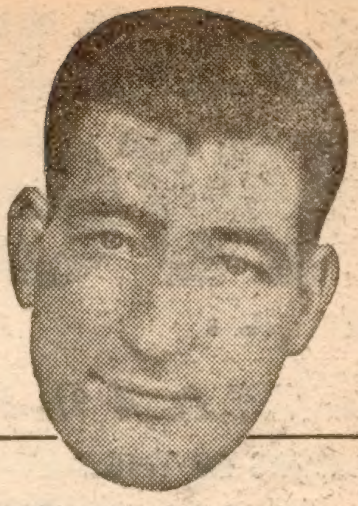
"I found your new cream, Poli-Grip, very pleasant and mild-tasting and it held my loose plates very tight, longer than anything I've tried."
Mrs. H. D. M., Beadentown, Florida

"I like the wonderful holding strength of your new *cream* better than anything I've ever used. I like Poli-Grip's refreshing taste, too."
H. B. V., East Canaan, Conn.

"I definitely prefer Poli-Grip to other products I've tried. It holds my plate tighter and feels comfortable longer. Poli-Grip is cooling, soothing, never gritty."
Mrs. K. L., Los Angeles, Calif.

Made and GUARANTEED by the makers of POLIDENT

I. C. S. STUDENT JUDGED BEST APPRENTICE IN THE NATION



Ex-G.I. Took Course in Electrical Engineering

I.C.S. Training proves its worth. Recently, Robert M. Hutchison of Evansville, Ind., was picked as "the best electrical apprentice in the nation." He had studied Electrical Engineering with the International Correspondence Schools.

The award was made by the National Electrical Contractors Association. Hundreds of apprentices from every section of the country figured in the competition.

The same training that brought "Bob" Hutchison national recognition is available to *you*. If you want the security and rewards that come with sound, practical training, mark and mail the coupon *today*. Find out what I.C.S. can do for *you*.

"Here's why I consider I. C. S. Courses exceptional:

1. **I.C.S. texts are easy to understand; explanations are very clear.**
2. **The student determines his own progress; gets a real sense of achievement.**
3. **Textbooks and lesson material make a valuable set of reference books."**

ROBERT M. HUTCHISON

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

APPROVED under the G.I. BILL

BOX 3970-U, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing ☐ Television
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop ☐ Mech. Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam-Diesel Loco. Eng.

Stationary Eng'r'g Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Power Plant Eng'r'g ☐ Steam Engr.

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Loom Fixing ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ App. Psychology ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Bus. Correspondence ☐ Bus. Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics ☐ Illustration
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing ☐ Retail Bus. Management
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Length of Service in World War II_____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.
Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

Giant western

VOL. 7, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JUNE, 1951

A Full-Length Novel

RIDERS OF THE DAWN . . . . . LOUIS L'AMOUR 9

Matt Sabre rode into an unknown battle, promising death to men he'd never seen, promising marriage to a girl he had never met!

A Complete Novelet

HERDS ALONG THE DANGER TRAIL . REEVE WALKER 84

It's on to New Mexico for ex-Confederate Bob Hunter and his kin, with raiding Apaches and vengeful foes to battle at every step!

Six Short Stories

SHIP AHOY AND NO MISTAKE . . . . BEN FRANK 73
The Sheriff of Coyote County hankers for the days of the pirates

DOUBLE DICK OPENS A CAGE . . . LEE PRIESTLEY 103
The old prospector and his cat go fishing and catch some trouble

FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH . . . JACKSON COLE 112
You'd be surprised at how much a roan can sometimes see and hear

WEASEL BLOOD . . . . . A. LESLIE 117
The only one who had a good word for the killer was his pursuer

KIND OF SUSPICIOUS . . DONALD BAYNE HOBART 132
When Peaceful Valley won't live up to its name, two waddies act!

FLAT TAIL'S CHALLENGE . . . . . .BURL TUTTLE 138
Noctee, the buck beaver, fights man and Nature to save his mate

Eight Features

FUR, FINS AND FEATHERS . . . FRANCIS H. AMES 6
COW-COUNTRY QUIZ . . ILLUSTRATED QUESTIONS 83
INDIANS AND HORSES . . . . . MARK KNIGHT 111
CUSTER WASN'T SCALPED . . . . . SAM BRANT 115
A BOOK BARGAIN ROUNDUP . . . READING GUIDE 116
HUNTING AND FISHING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS 130
HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE THIS? A RANGE PROBLEM 137
OUTLAW ROUNDUP . . . . . NORMAN RENARD 145

GIANT WESTERN. Published every other month and copyright 1951 by Best Publications, Inc., 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Subscription: (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Material is submitted at risk of the sender and must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All characters in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

MORE MEN wear work clothes bearing a Lee label... than any other brand!

THERE'S A Lee FOR EVERY JOB!

Overalls • Union-Alls • Matched Shirts & Pants
Dungarees • Overall Jackets • Lee Riders
& Jackets (Cowboy Pants for Men, Women and Boys)

THE H. D. LEE CO., Inc.

Kansas City, Mo. • South Bend, Ind. • Trenton, N. J.
Minneapolis, Minn. • San Francisco, Calif.

SOLD BY LEADING STORES COAST-TO-COAST

UNION MADE
Lee
Highest Quality
WORK CLOTHES

COPR. 1951
THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

FUR, FINS, and FEATHERS

A Department Conducted by FRANCIS H. AMES, Hunting and Fishing Expert

WITH summer rolling around most Western folks are high-tailing it for fishing waters when the chores are done. Most of them won't have any too good luck, and most of them don't give a hoot whether they do or not. It's the game that counts, not the kill, and that's a prime way to look at it.

Still, it's mighty satisfying to come home and roll something in cornmeal that smells up the frying pan. I watch folks fish every day on my stretch of river, and I've got it pretty well figured out why some gents get the scaled bacon and others don't. There's more to fishing than meets the casual eye. Until a man gets right down and squints careful like at the whole subject he ain't likely to do it justice, it appears to me.

Watch the man who fills his basket regular and you'll soon note that he fishes different than the fellow who goes home with only his pants hanging heavy. I get downright sorry for characters that persist in using methods that don't pay off, when all they have to do is lift their eyes, taking sharp notice of what some other chap might be doing across the pond.

Take drifting worms for trout, for instance. There isn't a trout living that's going to chase a worm drifting at sixty miles per hour. Neither will he take one that's snagged around a rock. So make that sinker weight just right to drift slow and easy and hold that rod high to keep the line drag out of the current. If you don't like worms, and it isn't fly time, skid a nymph along the bottom. A nymph will do a good job in bait water, cast upstream or across. Bear in mind that a nymph travels along with a stop and go motion.

It's the little things that count. Bass don't take worth a hoot when the water's too hot or too cold, but blue gill and crappie are apt to. A mess of blue gill are better eating, I've found, than black bass that didn't bite. If the water's too hot don't sulk around envying the fellow that came in with a nice string of bass. Chances are he earned them by getting up before the sun, or fishing after it went down. Maybe he knows of a cool spring hole. Maybe he'll tell you where it is if you ask him. If he won't, I'm not above sneaking along behind him to find out for myself.

It's all in the game. I sort of admire the get up and gumption of the chap who takes me to town thataway.

A man's got to be right smart, as a general rule, consistently to fool a fish. Until he knows this he isn't a fisherman at all. Take those Feather River rainbows that I ran into in northern California, for instance. They'd rise up in my face and slap my dry fly under with their tails and then go on about their business, sort of contemptuous like. I'd haul in my fly and re-oil it for floating.

It took me quite a while to figure out that those trout weren't just plain trying to make fun of me. They dunked my flies, circling below them, expecting them to drift down for easy gulping, nice and drowned.

Instead of jerking in my dunked fly for re-oiling I decided to just let nature take its course.

You simply can't beat Feather River rainbows, hot out of the frying pan when the sun goes down in northern California. They satisfy a man considerable.

[For questions and answers, see page 130]

BUILD A FINE BUSINESS FULL OR SPARE TIME!

Air Cooled

NEW NYLON MESH FAST-SELLER...

MAKE MONEY FROM THE FIRST HOUR!

FREE SELLING OUTFIT

SLIP ON— SLIP OFF!

Call on neighbors and friends all around home — show and sell amazing NEW KIND OF SHOE! Hidden elastic in front makes it easy to SLIP-ON, SLIP-OFF. No more broken laces, no more wrinkled tongues!

Just Blow through this shoe! Popular, fast-selling Air-Cooled feature with Genuine Nylon Mesh brings you quick orders easy as ABC!

Make up to $3.00 easy advance commission on every order you take — start in spare time if you prefer!

BETTER THAN A RETAIL SHOE STORE OF YOUR OWN

You can satisfy nearly every man and woman in your territory with over 160 dress, work, sport styles of the nation's finest COMFORT shoes! Offer your customers biggest selection. Fit them all SIMPLY, CORRECTLY with easy accurate methods. Draw on stock of 150,000 pairs — give real satisfaction.

WE SHOW YOU HOW TO SELL QUICK

You get big selling outfit, with Tested and Proved ways to make sales from the first hour you work! You get booklet of ideas written by 5,000 successful salesmen — "automatic" door openers — "magic" selling words — everything to make it easy for you to sell and make big money! Big ads in popular National magazines make you known as the expert Mason shoe fitter in your community.

REPLACEMENT OR A REFUND OF MONEY IF NOT AS ADVERTISED THEREIN
Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

THE SIGN OF VALUE!
Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal on Velvet-eez Air-Cushioned Insole shoes shows your customers they can't lose a dime! Send Coupon Today!

GREAT WOMEN'S LINE LIKE A BIG EXTRA FACTORY!

Scores of styles! Fast-Selling beauties in blue, green, red, tan, grey, brown, black and white bring you plenty of extra orders from housewives, waitresses, school girls, office girls, teen-agers—every home and office means you can sell to both men and women.

This sensational Velvet-eez Casual, sizes 4-10, width AA to EEE wanted by women from 16 to 60! High fashioned shoe brings restful relief on Cushion Insole that brings your customers back for more!

FOLLOW THIS MAN TO CASH!

"For the past four years, my average total weekly earnings have been around $80.00 per week—I couldn't have done it except for the liberal commissions paid by the company on this wonderful line of shoes and garments that really is above and beyond competition."

Charles Tuttle

Velvet-eez AIR CUSHION SELLS SHOES FAST!

You just say: "Feel that Cushion." When they do — THEY WANT, THEY BUY! Thousands of tiny air bubbles give new comfort to aching feet. Rush name for FREE Selling Outfit today!

THIS BRINGS FREE OUTFIT!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-737, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Rush me your free selling outfit, including sensational Air-Cooled Genuine Nylon Mesh Shoe, 5-second Velvet-eez demonstrator, exciting new women's line, and garments that can bring me big, extra cash with a *little* extra effort. Send everything FREE AND PREPAID.

Name.....

Address.....

City and State.....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-737, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

BILL OUTSMARTED THE SPIES AND THEN . . .

BILL BAKER, YOUNG LAWYER, FOUND A BRIEF CASE COMING HOME ON THE MIDNIGHT COMMUTING TRAIN AND NOW IT LOOKS LIKE HE HAS LOCATED THE OWNER . . .

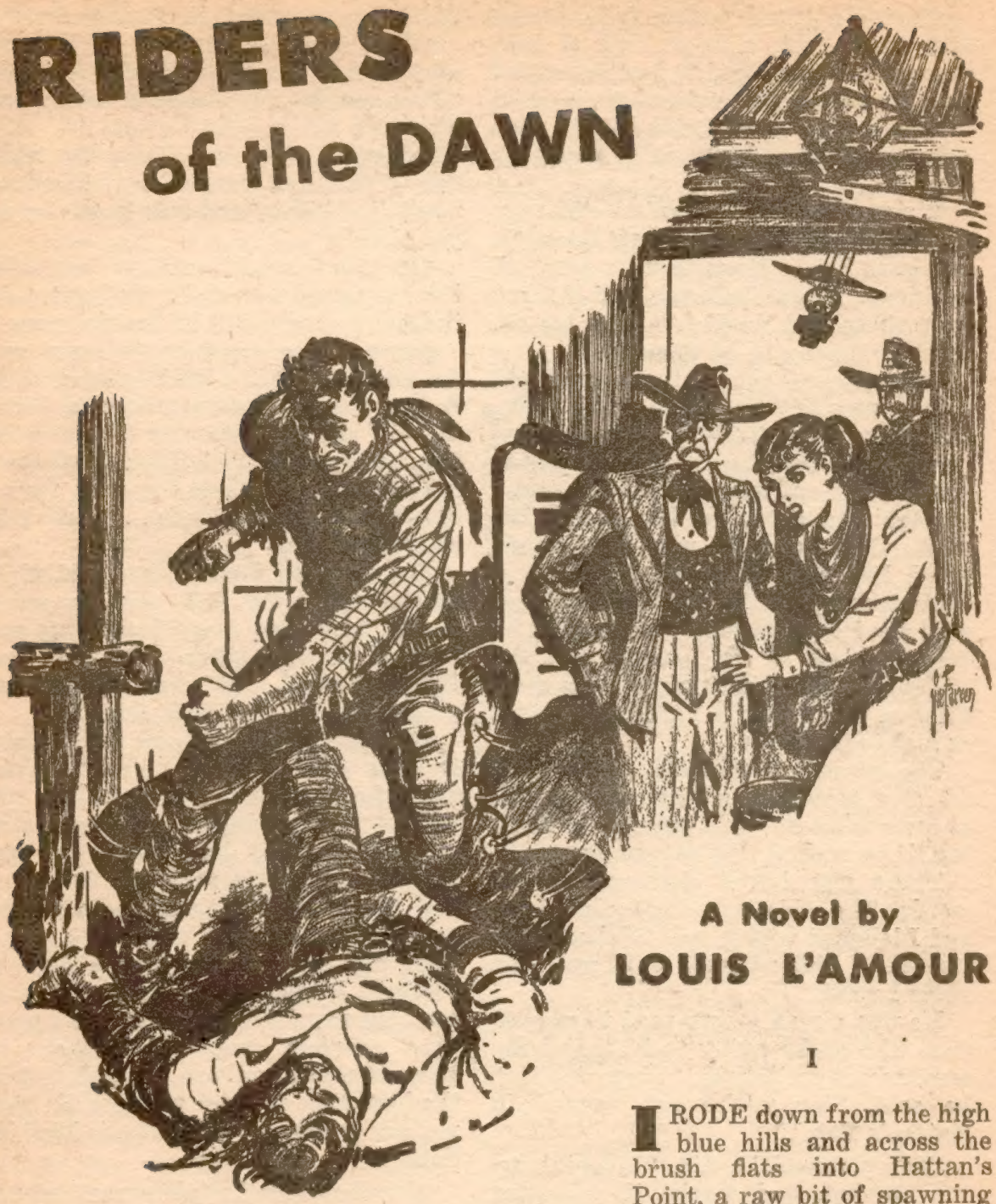
AND THEN THE FEDERAL AGENTS ARRIVED...

I FEEL LIKE A NEW MAN! THAT WAS THE SLICKEST, MOST REFRESHING SHAVE I'VE EVER HAD!
THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING

SO WHEN I SAW "URANIUM" AND "SECRET" ON THE PAPERS, I CALLED YOUR OFFICE FIRST.
. . . AND NETTED US TWO DANGEROUS SPIES
HE HAS LOOKS, COURAGE AND INTELLIGENCE. WE NEED MEN LIKE HIM

ENJOY FAST, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING . . . USE THIN GILLETTES.
FAR KEENER AND LONGER LASTING THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES, THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY AND ELIMINATE THE RISK OF SCRAPES AND NICKS. BUY THIN GILLETTES IN THE NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

RIDERS of the DAWN



A Novel by
LOUIS L'AMOUR

I

I RODE down from the high blue hills and across the brush flats into Hattan's Point, a raw bit of spawning hell, scattered hit or miss along the rocky slope of a rust-topped mesa.

Matt Sabre rode into an unknown battle, promising death to men he'd never seen, promising marriage to a girl he'd never met!

Ah, it's a grand feeling to be young and tough with a heart full of hell, strong muscles and quick, flexible hands! And the feeling that somewhere in town there's a man who would like to tear down your meat house with hands or gun.

It was like that, Hattan's Point was, when I swung down from my buckskin and gave him a word to wait with. A new town, a new challenge, and if there were those who wished to take me on, let them come and be damned.

I knew the whiskey of this town would be the raw whiskey of the last town, and of the towns behind it, but I shoved through the batwing doors and downed a shot of rye and looked around, measuring the men along the bar and at the tables. None of these men did I know, yet I had seen them all before in a dozen towns. The big, hard-eyed rancher with the iron-gray hair who thought he was the bull of the woods, and the knifelike man beside him with the careful eyes who would be gunslick and fast as a striking snake.

The big man turned his head toward me, as a great brown bear turns to look at something he could squeeze to nothing, if he wished. "Who sent for you?"

There was harsh challenge in the words. The cold demand of a conqueror, and I laughed within me. "Nobody sent for me. I ride where I want and stop when I want."

He was a man grown used to smaller men who spoke softly to him, and my answer was irritating. "Then ride on," he said, "for you're not wanted in Hattan's Point."

"Sorry, friend," I said. "I like it here. I'm staying, and maybe in whatever game you're playing, I'll buy chips. I don't like being ordered around by big frogs in such small puddles."

His big face flamed crimson, but before he could answer, another man spoke up, a tall young man with white hair. "What he means is that there's trouble here, and men are taking sides. Those who stand upon neither side are everybody's enemy in Hatton Point."

"So?" I smiled at them all, but my eyes held to the big bull of the woods. "Then maybe I'll choose a side. I always did like a fight."

"Then be sure you choose the right one—" this was from the knifelike man beside the bull—"and talk to me before you decide."

"I'll talk to you," I said, "or any man. I'm reasonable enough. But get this, the side I choose will be the right one!"

The sun was bright on the street and I walked outside, feeling the warm of it, feeling the cold from my muscles. Within me I chuckled, because I knew what they were saying back there. I'd thrown my challenge at them for pure fun; I didn't care about anyone . . . And then suddenly I did.

She stood on the boardwalk straight before me, slim, tall, with a softly curved body and magnificent eyes and hair of deepest black. Her skin was lightly tanned, her eyes an amazing green, her lips full and rich.

My black leather chaps were dusty, and my gray shirt was sweat-stained from the road. My jaws were lean and unshaven, and under my black, flat-crowned hat, my hair was black and rumpled. I was in no shape to meet a girl like that, but there she was, the woman I wanted, my woman.

In two steps I was beside her. "I realize," I said, as she turned to face me, "the time is inopportune. My presence scarcely inspires interest, let alone affection and love, but this seemed the best time for you to meet the man you are to marry. The name is Mathieu Sabre.

"Furthermore, I might as well tell you now. I am of Irish and French extraction, have no money, no property but a horse and the guns I wear, but I have been looking for you for years, and I could not wait to tell you that I was here, your future mate and husband." I bowed, hat in hand.

She stared, startled, amazed, and then angry. "Well, of all the egotistical—"

"Ah!" My expression was one of relief. "Those are kind words, darling, wonderful words! More true romances have begun with those words than any other! And now, if you'll excuse me?"

Taking one step back, I turned, vaulted over the hitching rail and untied my buckskin. Swinging into the saddle, I looked back. She was standing there, staring at me, her eyes wide, and the anger was leaving them. "Good afternoon," I said, bowing again. "I'll call upon you later!"

MATT SABRE

The Mogollon gunfighter, once marshal of Mobeetie

IT WAS time to get out and away, but I felt good about it. Had I attempted to advance the acquaintance I should have gotten nowhere, but my quick leaving would arouse her curiosity. There is no trait women possess more fortunate for men than their curiosity.

The livery stable at Hattan's Point was a huge and rambling structure that sprawled lazily over a corner at the beginning of the town. From a bin I got a scoop of corn, and while the buckskin absorbed this warning against hard days to come, I curried him carefully. A jingle of spurs warned me, and when I looked around, a tall, very thin man was leaning against the stall post watching me.

When I straightened up, I was looking into a pair of piercing dark eyes from under shaggy brows that seemed to overhang the long hatchet face. He was shabby and unkempt, but he wore two guns, the only man in town whom I'd seen wearing two except for the knifelike man in the saloon. "Hear you had a run in with Rud Maclaren."

"Run in? I'd not call it that. He suggested the country was crowded, and that I move on. So I told him I liked it here, and if the fight looked good I might choose a side."

"Good! Then I come right on time! Folks are talkin' about you. They say Canaval offered you a job on Maclaren's Bar M. Well, I'm beatin' him to it. I'm Jim Pinder, ramroddin' the CP outfit. I'll pay warrior wages, seventy a month an' found. All the ammunition you can use."

My eyes had strayed beyond him to two men lurking in a dark stall. They had, I was sure, come in with Pinder. The idea did not appeal to me. Shoving Pinder aside, I sprang into the middle of the open space between the rows of stalls.

"You two!" My voice rang in the echoing emptiness of the building. "Get out in the open! Start now or start shootin'!"

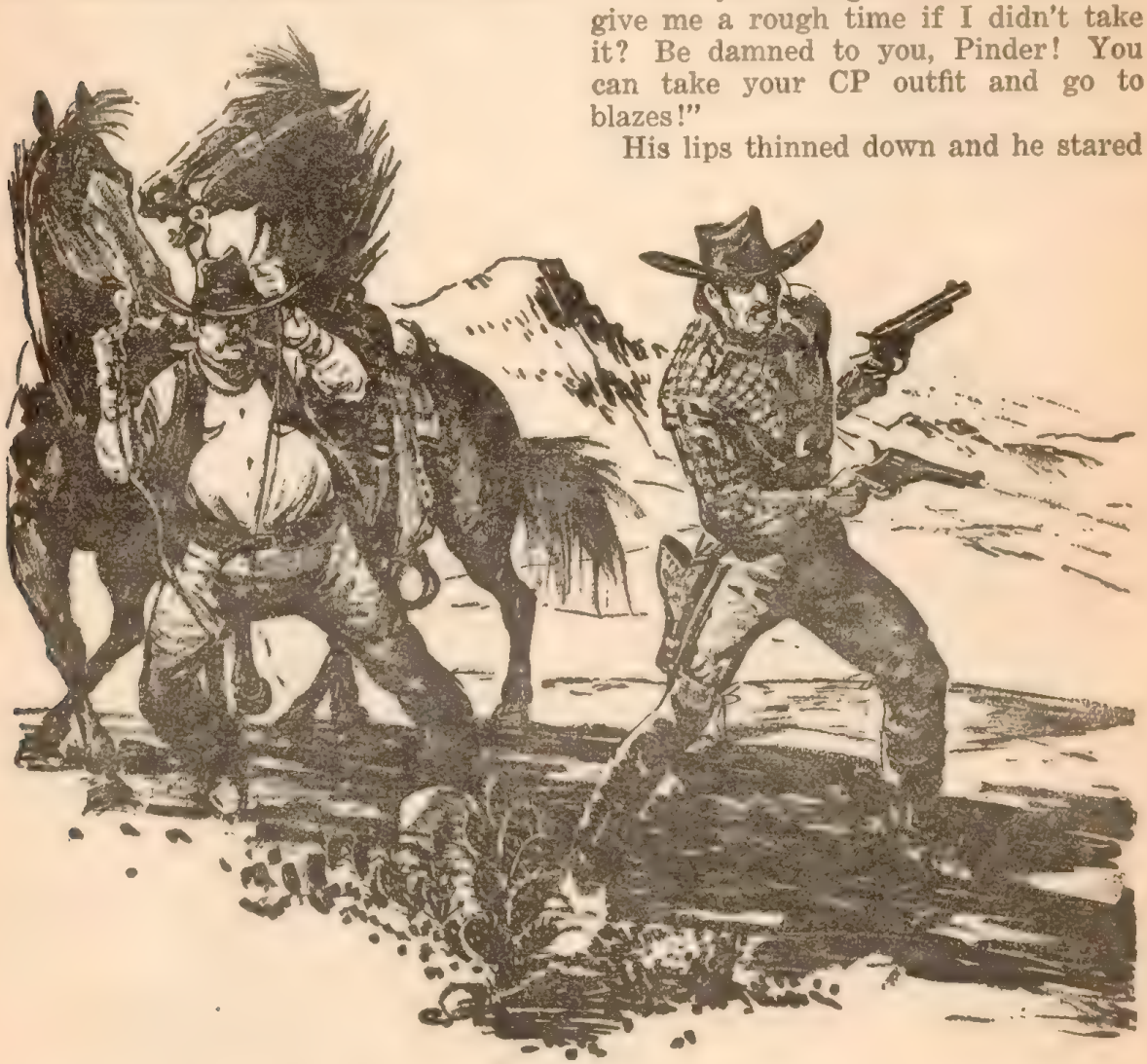
My hands were wide, fingers spread, and right then it did not matter to me which way they came. There was that old jumping devil in me, and the fury was driving me as it always did when action began to build up. Men who lurked in dark stalls did not appeal to me, nor the men who hired them.

They came out, slowly, hands wide. One of them was a big man with black hair and unshaven jowls. He looked surly. The other had the cruel, flat face of an Apache. "Suppose I'd come shootin'?" the black-haired man sneered.

"Then they'd be plantin' you at sundown." My eyes held him. "If you don't

believe that, cut loose your wolf right now."

That stopped him. He didn't like it, for they didn't know me and I was too ready. Wise enough to see that I was no half-baked gunfighter, they didn't know how much of it I could back up and weren't anxious to find out.



"You move fast." Pinder was staring at me with small eyes. "Suppose I had cut myself in with Blacky and the 'Pache?"

My chuckle angered him. "You? I had that pegged, Jim Pinder. When my guns came out you would have died first. You're faster than either of those two, so you'd take yours first. Then Blacky, and after him—" I nodded toward the Apache—"him. He would be the hardest to kill."

Pinder didn't like it, and he didn't like me. "I made an offer," he said.

"And you brought these coyotes to give me a rough time if I didn't take it? Be damned to you, Pinder! You can take your CP outfit and go to blazes!"

His lips thinned down and he stared at me. I've seldom seen such hatred in a man's eyes. "Then get out!" he said. "Get out fast! Join Maclaren, an' you die!"

"Then why wait? I'm not joining Maclaren so far as I know now, but I'm staying, Pinder. Any time you want what I've got, come shooting. I'll be ready."

"You swing a wide loop for a stranger. You started in the wrong

country. You won't live long."

"No?" I gave it to him flat and face up on the table. "No? Well, I've a hunch I'll handle the shovel that throws dirt on your grave, and maybe trigger the gun that puts you there. I'm not asking for trouble, but I like it, so whenever you're ready, let me know."

Our bullets crossed each other, but mine was a fraction the fastest

WITH that I left them. Up the street there was a sign:

MOTHER O'HARA'S COOKING
MEALS FOUR BITS

With the gnawing appetite of me, that looked as likely a direction as any. It was early for supper, and there were few at table. The young man with white hair and the girl I loved . . . and a few scattered others who ate sourly and in silence.

When I shoved the door open and stood there with my hat shoved back on my head and a smile on my face, the girl looked up, surprised, but ready for battle. I grinned at her, and bowed. "How do you do, the future Mrs. Sabre? The pleasure of seeing you again so soon is unexpected, but real!"

The man with her looked surprised, and the buxom woman of forty-five or so who came in from the kitchen looked quickly from one to the other of us.

The girl ignored me, but the man with the white hair nodded. "You've met Miss Maclaren, then?"

So? Maclaren it was? I might have suspected as much. "No, not formally. But we met briefly on the street, and I've been dreaming of her for years. It gives me great wonder to find her here,

although when I see the food on the table, I don't doubt why she is so lovely if it is here she eats!"

Mother O'Hara liked that. "Sure, 'n' I smell the blarney in that!" she said sharply. "But sit down, if you'd eat!"

My hat came off, and I sat on the bench opposite my girl, who looked at her plate in cold silence.

"My name is Key Chapin." The white-haired man extended his hand. "Yours, I take it, is Sabre?"

"Matt Sabre," I said.

A GRIZZLED man from the foot of the table looked up. "Matt Sabre from Dodge. Once marshal of Mobeetie, the Mogollon gunfighter."

They all looked from him to me, and I accepted the cup of coffee Mother O'Hara poured. "The gentleman knows me," I said quietly. "I've been known in those places."

"You refused Maclaren's offer?" Chapin asked.

"Yes, and Pinder's, too."

"Pinder?" Chapin's eyes were wary. "Is he in town?"

"Big as life." I could feel the girl's eyes on me. "Tell me what this fight is about?"

"What are most range wars about? Water, sheep, or grass. This one is water. There's a long valley east of here called Cottonwood Wash, and running east out of it is a smaller valley or canyon called the Two Bar. On the Two Bar is a stream of year-around water with volume enough to irrigate land or water thousands of cattle. Maclaren wants that water. The CP wants it."

"Who's got it?"

"A man named Ball. He's no fighter and has no money to hire fighters, but he hates Maclaren and refuses to do business with Pinder. So there they sit with the pot boiling and the lid about to blow off."

"And our friend Ball is right smack in the middle."

"Right. Gamblers around town are offering odds he won't last thirty days, even money that he'll be dead within ten."

That was enough for now. My eyes turned to the daughter of Rud Maclaren. "You can be buying your trousseau, then," I said, "for the time will not be long."

She looked at me coolly, but behind it there was a touch of impudence. "I'll not worry about it," she said calmly. "There's no weddings in boot hill."

They laughed at that, yet behind it I knew there was the feeling that she was right, and yet the something in me that was me, told me no . . . it was not my time to go. Not by gun or horse or rolling river . . . not yet.

"You've put your tongue to prophecy, darlin'," I said, "and I'll not say that I'll not end in boot hill, where many another good man has gone, but I will say this, and you sleep on it, daughter of Maclaren, for it's a bit of the truth. Before I sleep in boot hill there'll be sons and daughters of yours and mine on this ground.

"Yes, and believe me—" I got up to go— "when my time comes I'll be carried there by six tall sons of ours, and there'll be daughters of ours who'll weep at my grave, and you with them, remembering the years we've had."

When the door slapped shut behind me there was silence inside, and then through the thin walls I heard Mother O'Hara speak. "You'd better be buyin' that trousseau, Olga Maclaren, for there's a lad as knows his mind!"

This was the way of it then, and now I had planning to do, and my way to make in the world, for though I'd travelled wide and far, in many lands not my own, I'd no money nor home to take her to.

BEHIND me were wars and struggles, hunger, thirst, and cold, and the deep, splendid bitterness of fighting for a cause I scarcely understood, because there was in me the undying love of a lost cause and a world to win. And now I'd my own to win, and a threshold to

find to carry her over.

And then, as a slow night wind moved upon my cheek and stirred the hair above my brow, I found an answer. I knew what I would do, and the very challenge of it sent my blood leaping, and the laughter came from my lips as I stepped into the street and started across the street.

Then I stopped, for there was a man before me.

He was a big man, towering above my six feet and two inches, broader and thicker than my two hundred pounds. He was a big-boned man and full of raw power, unbroken and brutal. He stood there, wide-legged before me, his face wide as my two hands, his big head topped by a mat of tight curls, his hat missing somewhere.

"You're Sabre?" he said.

"Why, yes," I said, and he hit me.

Never did I see the blow start. Never even did I see the balled fist of him, but it bludgeoned my jaw like an ax butt, and something seemed to slam me behind the knees, and I felt myself going. He caught me again before I could fall, and then dropped astride of me and began to swing short, brutal blows to my head with both big fists. All of two hundred and sixty pounds he must have weighed, and none of it wasted by fat. He was naked, raw, unbridled power.

Groggy, bloody, beaten, I fought to get up, but he was astride me, and my arms were pinned to my sides by his great knees. His fists were slugging me with casual brutality. Then suddenly, he got up and stepped back and kicked me in the ribs. "If you're conscious," he said, "hear me. I'm Morgan Park, and I'm the man who marries Olga Maclaren!"

My lips were swollen and bloody. "You lie!" I said, and he kicked me again, then stepped over me and walked away, whistling.

Somehow I got my arms under me. Somehow I dragged myself against the stage station wall, and then I lay there, my head throbbing like a great drum, the blood slowly drying on my split lips and broken face. It had been a beating I'd taken, and the marvel of it was with me. I'd not been licked since I was a lad, and never in all my days had I felt such blows as these. His fists were like knots of oak, and the arms behind them like the limbs of a tree.

I had a broken rib, I thought, but one thing I knew. It was time for me to travel. Never would I have the daughter of Maclaren see me like this!

MY HANDS found the building corner and I pulled myself to my feet, and staggering behind the buildings, I got to the corner of the livery stable. Entering, I got to my horse, and somehow I got the saddle on him and led him out of the door. And then I stopped for an instant, in the light.

Across the way, on the stoop of Mother O'Hara's, was Olga Maclaren!

The light was on my face, swollen, bloody and broken. She stepped down off the porch and came over to me, looking up, her eyes wide with wonder. "So it's you. He found you then. He always hears, and this always happens. You see, it is not so simple a thing to marry Olga Maclaren!" There seemed almost regret in her voice. "And now you're leaving!"

"Leaving? That I am, but I'll be back!" The words fumbled through my swollen lips. "Have your trousseau ready, daughter of Maclaren! I mean what I say! Wait for me. I'll be coming again, darlin', and when I do it will be first to tear down Morgan Park's great hulk, to rip him with my fists!"

There was coolness in her voice, shaded with contempt. "You boast! All you have done is talk—and take a beating!"

That made me grin, and the effort made me wince, but I looked down at her. "It's a bad beginning, at that, isn't it? But wait for me, darlin', I'll be coming back!"

I could feel her watching me ride down the street.

II

THROUGHOUT the night I rode into wilder and wilder country, always with the thought of what faced me. At daybreak I bedded down in a canyon tall with pines, resting there while my side began to mend. My thoughts returned again and again to the shocking power of those punches I had taken. It was true the man had slugged me unexpectedly, and once pinned down I'd had no chance against his great weight. Nonetheless I'd been whipped soundly. Within me there was a gnawing eagerness to go back—and not with guns. This man I must whip with my hands.

The Two Bar was the key to the situation. Could it be had with a gun and some blarney? The beating I'd taken rankled, and the contempt of Olga Maclaren, and with it the memory of the hatred of Jim Pinder and the coldness of Rud Maclaren. On the morning of the third day I mounted the buckskin and turned him toward the Two Bar.

A noontime sun was darkening my buckskin with sweat when I turned up Cottonwood Wash. There was green grass here, and trees, and the water that trickled down was clear and pure. The walls of the Wash were high and the trees towered to equal them, and the occasional cattle looked fat and lazy, far better than elsewhere on this range. The path ended abruptly in a gate bearing a large sign in white letters against a black background.

TWO BAR GATE
RANGED FOR A SPENCER .56
SHOOTING GOING ON HERE

Ball evidently had his own ideas. No trespasser who got a bullet could say he hadn't been warned. Beyond this gate a man took his own chances. Taking off my hat, I rose in my stirrups and waved it toward the house.

A gun boomed, and I heard the sharp *whap* of a bullet whipping past. It was a warning shot, so I merely waved once more. That time the bullet was close, so I grabbed my chest with both hands and slid from the saddle to the ground. Speaking to the buckskin, I rolled over behind a boulder. Leaving my hat on the ground in plain sight, I removed a boot and placed it to be seen from the gate. Then I crawled into the brush, from where I could cover the gate.

Several minutes later, Ball appeared. Without coming through the gate, he couldn't see the boot was empty.

He was a tall old man with a white handlebar mustache, and shrewd eyes. No fool, he studied the layout carefully, but to all appearances his aim had miscalculated and scored a hit. He glanced at the strange brand on the buckskin and at the California bridle and bit. Finally, he opened the gate and came out, and as he moved toward my horse his back turned toward me. "Freeze, Ball! You're dead in my sights!"

He stood still. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What you want with me?"

"No trouble. I came to talk business."

"I got no business with anybody."

"You've business with me. I'm Matt Sabre. I've had a run in with Jim Pinder and told off Maclaren when he told me to leave. I've taken a beating from Morgan Park."

Ball chuckled. "You say you want no trouble with me, but from what you say, you've had it with ever'body else!"

He turned at my word and I holstered my gun. He stepped back far enough to see the boot, then he grinned. "Good trick. I'll not bite on that one again. What you want?"

PULLING on my boot and retrieving my hat, I told him. "I've no money. I'm a fighting man and a sucker for the tough side of any scrap. When I rode into Hattan's I figured on trouble, but when I saw Olga Maclaren I decided to stay and marry her. I've told her so."

"No wonder Park beat you. He's run off the local lads." He studied me curiously. "What did she say?"

"Very little, and when I told her I

was coming back to face Park again she thought I was loud-mouthed."

"Aim to try him again?"

"I'm going to whip him. But that's not all. I plan to stay in this country, and there's only one ranch in this country I want or would have."

Ball's lips thinned. "This one?"

"It's the best, and anybody who owns it stands in the middle of trouble. I'd be mighty uncomfortable anywhere else."

"What you aim to do about me? This here's my ranch."

OLGA MACLAREN
daughter of Rud Maclaren, owner of the Boxed M

"Let's walk up to your place and talk it over."

"We'll talk here." Ball's hands were on his hips and I had no doubt he'd go for a gun if I made a wrong move. "Speak your piece."

"All right, here it is. You're buckin' a stacked deck. Gamblers are offerin' thirty to one you won't last thirty days. Both Maclaren and Pinder are out to get you. What I want is a fighting, working partnership. Or you sell out and I'll pay you when I can. I'll take over the fight."

He nodded toward the house. "Come on up. We'll talk this over."

Two hours later the deal was ironed out. He could not stay awake every night. He could not work and guard his stock. He could not go to town for supplies. Together we could do all of it.

"You'll be lucky if you last a week," he told me. "When they find out they'll be fit to be tied."

"They won't find out right away. First I'll buy supplies and ammunition, and get back here."

"Good idea. But leave Morgan Park alone. He's as handy with a gun as his fists."

THE Two Bar controlled most of Cottonwood Wash and on its eastern side opened into the desert wilderness with only occasional patches of grass and much desert growth. Maclaren's Bar M and Pinder's CP bordered the ranch on the west, with Maclaren's range extending to the desert land in one portion, but largely west of the Two Bar.

Both ranches had pushed the Two Bar cattle back, usurping the range for their own use. In the process of pushing them north most of the Two Bar calves had vanished under Bar M or CP brands. "Mostly the CP," Ball advised. "Them Pinders are pizen mean. Rollie rode with the James boys a few times, and both of them were with Quantrill. Jim's a fast gun, but nothin' to compare with Rollie."

At daylight, with three unbranded mules to carry the supplies, I started for Hattan's, circling around to hit the trail on the side away from the Two Bar. The town was quiet enough, and the day warm and still. As I loaded the supplies I was sweating. The sweat trickled into my eyes and my side pained me. My face was still puffed, but both my eyes were now open. Leading my mules out of town, I concealed them in some brush with plenty of grass and then returned to Mother O'Hara's.

Key Chapin and Canaval were there,

and Canaval looked up at me. "Had trouble?" he asked. "That job at the Bar M is still open."

"Thanks. I'm going to run my own outfit." Foolish though it was, I said it. Olga had come in the door behind me, her perfume told me who it was, and even without it something in my blood would have told me. From that day on she was never to be close to me without my knowledge. It was something deep and exciting that was between us.

"Your own outfit?" They were surprised. "You're turning nester?"

"No. Ranching." Turning, I swept off my hat and indicated the seat beside me. "Miss Maclaren? May I have the pleasure?"

Her green eyes were level and measuring. She hesitated, then shook her head. Walking around the table she seated herself beside Canaval.

Chapin was puzzled. "You're *ranching?* If there's any open range around here, I don't know of it."

"It's a place over east of here," I replied lightly, "the Two Bar."

"What about the Two Bar?" Rud Maclaren had come in. He stood cold and solid, staring down at me.

Olga glanced up at her father, some irony in her eyes. "Mr. Sabre was telling us that he is ranching—on the Two Bar."

"What?" Glasses and cups jumped at his voice, and Ma O'Hara hurried in from her kitchen, rolling pin in hand.

"That's right." I was enjoying it. "I've a working partnership with Ball. He needed help, and I didn't want to leave despite all the invitations I was getting." Then I added, "A man dislikes being far from the girl he's to marry."

"What's that?" Maclaren demanded, his eyes puzzled.

"Why, Father!" Olga's eyes widened. "Haven't you heard? The whole town is talking of it! Mr. Sabre has said he is going to marry me!"

"I'll see him in hell first!" Maclaren replied flatly. "Young man, you stop using my daughter's name or you'll face me."

"No one," I said quietly, "has more respect for your daughter's name than I. It's true that I've said she was to be my wife. That is not disrespectful, and it's certainly true. As for facing you, I'd rather not. I'd like to keep peace with my future father-in-law."

CANAVAL chuckled and even Olga seemed amused. Key Chapin looked up at Rud. "One aspect of this may have escaped you. Sabre is now a partner of Ball. Why not make it easy for Sabre to stay on, then buy him out?"

Maclaren's head lifted as he absorbed the idea. He looked at Sabre with new interest. "We might do business, young man."

"We might," I replied, "but not under threats. Nor do I intend to sell out my partner. Nor did I take the partnership with any idea of selling out. Tomorrow or the next day I shall choose a building site. Also, I expect to restock the Two Bar range.

"All of which brings me to the point of this discussion. It has come to my attention that Bar M cattle are trespassing on Two Bar range. You have just one week to remove them. The same goes for the CP. You've been told and you understand. I hope we'll have no further trouble."

Maclaren's face purpled with fury. Before he could find words to reply, I was on my feet. "It's been nice seeing you," I told Olga. "If you care to help plan your future home, why don't you ride over?"

With that I stepped out the door before Maclaren could speak. Circling the building, I headed for my horse.

Pinder's black-haired man was standing there with a gun in his hand. Hatred glared from his eyes. "Figured you pulled a smart one, hey?" he sneered. "Now I'll kill you!"

His finger started to whiten with pressure, and I hurled myself aside and

palmed my gun. Even before I could think, my gun jarred in my hand. Once! Twice!

Blacky's bullet had torn my shirt collar and left a trace of blood on my neck. Blacky stared at me, then lifted to his toes and fell, measuring his length upon the hard ground.

Men rushed from the buildings, crowding around. "Seen it!" one man explained quietly. "Blacky laid for him with a drawed gun."

Canaval was among the men. He looked at me with cool, attentive gaze. "A drawn gun? That was fast, man."

Ball was at the gate when I arrived. "Trouble?" he asked quickly.

MY ACCOUNT was brief.

"Well, one less for later," said Ball. "If it had to be anybody it's better it was Blacky, but now the Pinders will be after you."

"Where does Morgan Park stand?" I asked. "And what about Key Chapin?"

"Park?" Ball said. "He's fixin' to marry the Maclaren girl. That's where his bread's buttered. He's got him a ranch on the Arizona line, but he don't stay there much. Chapin publishes the *Rider's Voice,* a better newspaper 'n you'd expect in this country. He's also a lawyer, plays a good hand of poker, an' never carries a gun. If anybody isn't takin' sides, it's him."

Mostly I considered the cattle situation. Our calves had been rustled by the large outfits, and if we were to prosper we must get rid of the stock we now had and get some young stuff. Our cattle would never be in better shape, and would get older and tougher. Now was the time to sell. A drive was impossible, for two of us couldn't be away at once, and nobody wanted any part of a job with the Two Bar. Ball was frankly discouraged. "No use, Matt. They got us bottled up. We're through whenever they want to take us."

An idea occurred to me. "By the way, when I was drifting down around Organ Rock the other day, I spotted an outfit down there in the hills. Know 'em?"

Ball's head came up sharply. "Should have warned you. Stay away. That's the Benaras place, the B Bar B brand. There's six in the family that I know of, an' they have no truck with anybody. Dead shots, all of 'em. Few years back some rustlers run off some of their stock. Nobody heard no more about it until Sheriff Will Tharp was back in the badlands east of here. He hadn't seen hide nor hair of man nor beast for miles when suddenly he comes on six skeletons hanging from a rock tower."

"Skeletons?"

Ball took the pipe from his mouth and spat. "Six of 'em, an' a sign hung to 'em readin', *'They rustled B Bar B cows.'* Nothin' more."

But quite enough! The Benaras outfit had been let strictly alone after that. Nevertheless, an idea was in my mind and the very next morning I saddled up and drifted south.

It was wild and lonely country, furrowed and eroded by thousands of years of sun, wind and rain. A country tumbled and broken as if by an insane giant. Miles of raw, unfleshed land with only occasional spots of green to break its everlasting reds, pinks and whites. Like an oasis, there appeared a sudden cluster of trees, green fields and fat, drifting cattle. "Whoever these folks are, Buck," I commented to my horse, "they work hard."

The click of a drawn back hammer froze Buck in his tracks, and carefully I kept my hands on the saddlehorn. "Goin' somewhar, stranger?" Nobody was in sight among the boulders at the edge of the field.

"Yes. I'm looking for the boss of the B Bar B."

"What might you want with him?"

"Business talk. I'm friendly."

The chuckle was dry. "Ever see a man covered by two Spencers that wasn't friendly?"

The next was a girl's voice. "Who you ridin' for?"

"I'm Matt Sabre, half owner of the Two Bar, Ball's outfit."

"You mean that ol' coot took a partner? You could be lyin'."

"Do I see the boss?"

"I reckon." A tall boy of eighteen stepped from the rocks. Lean and drawn, his hatchet face looked tough and wise. He carried his Spencer as if it was part of him. He motioned with his head.

THE old man of the tribe was standing in front of a house built like a fort. Tall as his son, he was straight as a lodgepole pine. He looked me up and down, then said, "Get down an' set."

A stout motherly woman put out some cups and poured coffee. Explaining who I was, I said, "We've some fat stock about ready to drive. I'd like to make a swap for some of your young stuff. We can't make a drive, don't dare even leave the place or they'd steal it from us. Our stock is in good shape, but all our young stuff has been rustled."

"You're talkin'." He studied me from under shaggy brows. He looked like a patriarch right out of the Bible, a hard-bitten old man of the tribe who knew his own mind and how to make it stick. He listened as I explained our setup and our plans. Finally, he nodded. "All right, Sabre. We'll swap. My boys will help you drive 'em back here."

"No need for that. Once started down the canyons I'll need no help. No use you getting involved in this fight."

He turned his fierce blue eyes on me. "I'm buyin' cows," he said grimly. "Anybody who wants trouble over that, let 'em start it!"

"Now, Paw!" Mother Benaras smiled at me. "Paw figures he's still a-feudin'."

Old Bob Benaras knocked out his pipe on the hearth. "We're beholden to no man, nor will we backwater for any man. Nick, roust out an' get Zeb, then saddle up an' ride with this man. You ride to this man's orders. Start no trouble, but back up for nobody. Understand?"

He looked around at me. "You'll eat first. Maw, set up the table. We've a guest in the house." He looked searchingly at me. "Had any trouble with Jim Pinder yet?"

It made a short tale; then I added, "Blacky braced me in town a few days ago. Laid for me with a drawn gun."

Benaras stared at me and the boys exchanged looks. The old man tamped tobacco into his pipe. "He had it comin'. Jolly had trouble with that one. Figured soon or late he'd have to kill him. Glad you done it."

All the way back to the Two Bar we watched the country warily, but it was not until we were coming up to the gate that anyone was sighted. Two riders were on the lip of the Wash, staring at us through a glass. We passed through the gate and started up the trail. There was no challenge. Nick said suddenly, "I smell smoke!"

Fear went through me like an electric shock. Slapping the spurs to my tired buckskin I put the horse up the trail at a dead run, Nick and Zeb right behind me. Turning the bend in the steep trail, I heard the crackle of flames and saw the ruins of the house!

ALL was in ruins, the barn gone, the house a sagging, blazing heap. Leaving my horse on the run I dashed around the house. "Ball!" I yelled. "Ball!" And above the crackle of flames, I heard a cry.

He was back in a niche of rock near the spring. How he had lived this long I could not guess. His clothes were charred and it was obvious he had somehow crawled, wounded, from the burning house. He had been fairly riddled with bullets.

His fierce old eyes were pleading. "Don't let 'em git . . . git the place. Yours . . . it's yours now." His eyes went to Nick and Zeb. "You're witnesses . . . I leave it to him. Never to sell . . . never to give up!"

"Who was it?" For the first time in my life I really wanted to kill. Although I had known this old man for only a few

days I had come to feel affection for him and respect. Now he was dying, shot down and left for dead in a blazing house.

"Pinder!" His voice was hoarse. "Jim an' Rollie. Rollie, he . . . he was dressed like you. Never had no chance. Fun-funny thing. I . . . I thought I saw . . . Park."

"Morgan Park?" I was incredulous. "With the Pinders?"

His lips stirred, but he died forming the words. When I got up, there was in me such hatred as I had never believed was possible. "Everyone of them!" I said. "I'll kill every man of them for this!"

"Amen!" Zeb and Nick spoke as one. "He was a good ol' man. Pappy liked him."

"Did you hear him say Morgan Park was with the Pinders?"

"Sounded like it," Zeb admitted, "but 'tain't reasonable. He's thick with the Maclarens. Couldn't have been him."

Zeb was probably right. The light had been bad, and Ball had been wounded. He could have made a mistake.

The stars went out and night moved in over the hills and gathered black and rich in the canyons. Standing there in the darkness we could smell the smoke from the burned house and see occasional sparks and flickers of tiny flames among the charred timbers. A ranch had been given me, but I had lost a friend. The road before me stretched dark and long, a road I must walk alone, gun in hand.

III

FOR two days we combed the draws and gathered cattle, yet at the end of the second day we had but three hundred head. The herds of the Two Bar had been sadly depleted by the rustling of the big brands. On the morning of the third day we started the herd. Neither of the men had questioned me,

JIM PINDER

Ramrod of the CP outfit

but now Zeb wanted to know, "You aim to leave the ranch unguarded? Ain't you afraid they'll move in?"

"If they do they can move out or be buried here. That ranch was never to be given up, and believe me, it won't be!"

The canyon channeled the drive and the cattle were fat and easy to handle. It took us all day to make the drive, but my side pained me almost none at all, and only that gnawing fury at the killers of the old man remained to disturb me. They had left the wounded man to burn, and for that they would pay.

Jonathan and Jolly Benaras helped me take the herd of young stuff back up the trail. Benaras had given me at least fifty head more than I had asked, but the cattle I had turned over to him were as good as money in the bank, so he lost nothing by his generosity.

When we told him what had happened, he nodded. "Jolly was over to Hattan's. It was the Pinders, all right. That Apache tracker of theirs along with Bunt Wilson and Corby Kitchen an'

three others. They were with the Pinders."

"Hear anything about Morgan Park?"

"No. Some say Lyell, that rider of Park's, was in the crowd."

That could have been it. Ball might have meant to tell me it was a rider of Park's. We pushed the young stuff hard to get back, but Jonathan rode across the drag before we arrived. "Folks at your place. Two, three of 'em."

My face set cold as stone. "Bring the herd. I'll ride ahead."

Jonathan's big adam's apple bobbed. "Jolly an' me, we ain't had much fun lately. Cain't we ride with you?"

An idea hit me. "Where's their camp?"

"Foot of the hill where the house was. They got a tent."

"Then we'll take the herd. Drive 'em right over the tent!"

Jolly had come back to the drag. He chuckled. "Why, sure!" He grinned at Jonathan. "Won't Nick an' Zeb be sore? Missin' all the fun?"

We started the herd. They were young stuff and still full of ginger, ready enough to run. They came out of the canyon not more than four hundred yards from the camp and above the gate. Then we really turned them loose, shooting and shouting; we started that herd on a dead run for the camp. Up ahead we saw men springing to their feet, and one man raced for his rifle. They hadn't expected me to arrive with cattle, so they were caught completely off-guard. Another man made a dive for his horse and the startled animal sprang aside, and as he grabbed again, it kicked out with both feet and started to run.

Running full-tilt, the herd hit the camp. The man who lost his horse scrambled atop a large rock and the others lit out for the cliffs, scattering away from the charging cattle. But the herd went through the camp, tearing up the tent, grinding the food into the earth, smearing the fire and smashing the camp utensils into broken and useless things under their charging feet.

One of the men who had gotten into the saddle swung his horse and came charging back, his face red with fury. "What goes on here?" he yelled.

THE horse was a Bar M. Maclaren's men had beaten the CP to it.

Kneeing my horse close to him, I said, "I'm Matt Sabre, owner of the Two Bar, with witnesses to prove it. You're trespassin'. Now light a shuck!"

"I will like hell!" His face was dark with fury. "I got my orders, an' I—"

My fist smashed into his teeth and he left the saddle, hitting the ground with a thud. Blazing with fury, I lit astride him, jerking him to his feet. My left hooked hard to his jaw and my right smashed him in the wind. He went down, but he got up fast and came in swinging. He was a husky man, mad clear through and for about two minutes we stood toe to toe and swapped it out. Then he started to back up and I caught him with a sweeping right that knocked him to the dust. He started to get up, then thought the better of it. "I'll kill you for this!"

"When you're ready!" I said, then turned around. Jonathan and Jolly had rounded up two of the men and they stood waiting for me. One was a slim, hard-faced youngster who looked like the devil was riding him. The other was a stocky redhead with a scar on his jaw. The redhead stared at me, hatred in his eyes. "You ruined my outfit. What kind of a deal is this?"

"If you ride for a fighting brand you take the good with the bad," I told him. "What did you expect when you came up here? A tea party? You go back and tell Maclaren not to send boys to do a man's job and that the next trespasser will be shot."

The younger one looked at me, sneering. "What if he sends me?" Contempt twisted his lips. "If I'd not lost my gun in the scramble I'd make you eat that."

"Jolly! Lend me your gun!"

Without a word, Jolly Benaras handed it to me.

The youngster's eyes were cold and calculating, but wary now. He suspected a trick, but could not guess what it might be.

Taking the gun by the barrel, I walked toward him. "You get your chance," I said. "I'm giving you this gun and you can use it any way you like. Try a border roll or shoot through that open tip holster. Anyway you try it, I'm going to kill you."

HE STARED at me and then the gun. His tongue touched his lips. He wanted that gun more than anything else in the world. He had guts, that youngster did, guts and the streak of viciousness it takes to make a killer, but suddenly he was face to face with it at close range and he didn't like it. He would learn if he lived long enough, but right now he didn't like any part of it. Yet he wore the killer's brand and we both knew it.

"It's a trick," he said. "You ain't that much of a fool!"

"Fool?" That brought my own fury surging to the top. "Why, you cheap, phony would-be badman! I'd give you two guns and beat you any day you like! I'll face you right now. You shove your gun in my belly and I'll shove mine in yours! If you want to die that makes it easy! Come on, gunslick! What do you say?"

Crazy? Right then I didn't care. His face turned whiter but his eyes were vicious. He was trembling with eagerness to grab that gun. But face to face? Guns shoved against the body? We would both die, we couldn't miss. He shook his head, his lips dry.

My fingers held the gun by the barrel. Tossing it up suddenly I caught it by the butt and without stopping the motion, I slashed the barrel down over his skull, and he hit the dirt at my feet. Turning my back on them I returned the pistol to Jolly.

"You!" I said then to the redhead. "Take off your boots!"

"Huh?" he was startled.

"Take 'em off! Then take his off! When he comes out of it, start walking!"

"Walkin'?" Red's face blanched. "Look, man, I'll—"

"You'll walk. All the way back to Hattan or the Bar M. You'll start learnin' what it means to try stealin' a man's ranch."

"It was orders," he protested.

"You could quit, couldn't you?"

His face was sullen. "Wait until Maclaren hears of this! You won't last long! Far's that goes—" he motioned at the still figure on the ground—"he'll be huntin' you now. That's Bodie Miller!"

The name was familiar. Bodie Miller had killed five or six men. He was utterly vicious, and although lacking seasoning, he had it in him to be one of the worst of the badmen.

We watched them start, three men in their sock feet with twenty miles of desert and mountains before them. Now they knew what they had tackled. They would know what war meant.

The cattle were no cause for worry. They would drift into canyons where there was plenty of grass and water, more than on the B Bar B. "Sure you won't need help?" Jolly asked hopefully. "We'd like t' side you."

"Not now. This is my scrap."

They chuckled. "Well," Jolly grinned, "they cain't never say you didn't walk in swingin'. You've jumped nearly the whole durned country!"

NOBODY knew that better than I, so when they were gone I took my buckskin and rode back up the narrow Two Bar Canyon. It narrowed down and seemed to end, and unless one knew, a glance up the canyon made it appear to be boxed in, but actually there was a turn and a narrower canyon leading into a maze of canyons and broken lava flows. There was an ancient cliff house back there, and in it Ball and I had stored supplies for a last-ditch stand. There was an old kiva with one side broken down and room enough to stable the buckskin.

At daybreak I left the canyon behind me, riding watchfully, knowing I rode among enemies. No more than two miles from the canyon toward which I was heading, I rounded a bend and saw a dozen riders coming toward me at a canter. Sighting me, they yelled in chorus, and a shot rang out. Wheeling the buckskin I slapped the spurs to him and went up the Wash at a dead run. A bullet whined past my ear, but I dodged into a branch canyon and raced up a trail that led to the top of the plateau. Behind me I heard the riders race past the canyon's mouth, then a shout as a rider glimpsed me, and the wheeling of horses as they turned. By the time they entered the canyon mouth I was atop the mesa.

Sliding to the ground, Winchester in hand, I took a running dive to shelter among some rocks and snapped off a quick shot. A horse stumbled and his rider went off over his head. I opened up, firing as rapidly as I could squeeze off the shots. They scattered for shelter, one man scrambling with a dragging leg.

Several of the horses had raced away, and a couple of others stood ground-hitched. On one of these was a big canteen. A bullet emptied it, and when the other horse turned a few minutes later, I shot into that canteen also. Bullets ricocheted around me, but without exposing themselves they could not get a good shot at me, while I could cover their hideout without trouble.

A foot showed and I triggered my rifle. A bit of leather flew up and the foot was withdrawn. My position could not have been better. As long as I remained where I was, they could neither advance nor retreat, but were pinned down and helpless. They were without water, and it promised to be an intensely hot day. Having no desire to kill them, I still wished to make them thoroughly sick of the fight. These men enjoyed the fighting as a break in the monotony of range work, but knowing cowhands, I knew they would become heartily sick of a battle that meant waiting, heat, no water, and no chance to fight back.

FOR some time all was still. Then a man tried to crawl back toward the canyon mouth, evidently believing himself unseen. Letting go a shot at a rock ahead of him, I splattered his face with splinters and he ducked back, swearing loudly.

"Looks like a long hot day, boys!" I yelled. "See what it means when you jump a small outfit? Ain't so easy as you figured, is it?"

Somebody swore viciously and there were shouted threats. My own canteen was full, so I sat back and rolled a smoke. Nobody moved below, but the sun began to level its burning rays into the oven of the canyon mouth. The hours marched slowly by, and from time to time when some thirsty soul grew restive at waiting, I threw a shot at him.

"How long you figure you can keep us here?" one of them yelled. "When we get out, we'll get you!"

"Maybe you won't get out," I yelled back cheerfully. "I like it here. I've got water, shade, grub, and plenty of smokin' tobacco. Also," I added, "I've got better than two hundred rounds of ammunition. You hombres are riding for the wrong spread."

Silence descended over the canyon and two o'clock passed. Knowing they could get no water aggravated thirst. The sun swam in a coppery sea of heat, the horizon lost itself in heat waves. Sweat trickled down my face and down my body under the arms. Where I lay there was not only shade but a slight breeze, but down there heat would reflect from the canyon walls and all wind would be shut off. Finally, letting go with a shot, I slid back out of sight and got to my feet.

My buckskin cropped grass near some rocks, well under the shade. Shifting my rifle to my left hand I slid down the bank, mopping my face with my right. Then I stopped stock-still, my right

hand belt high. Backed up against a rock near my horse was a man I knew at once although I had never seen him—Rollie Pinder!

"You gave them boys hell," he said conversationally, "an' good for 'em. They're Bar M riders. It's a shame it has to end."

"Yeah," I drawled, watching him closely. He could be waiting for only one reason.

"Hear you're mighty fast, but it won't do you any good. I'm Rollie Pinder!"

AS HE spoke, he grabbed for his gun. My left hand was on the rifle barrel a few inches ahead of the trigger guard, the butt in front of me, the barrel pointed slightly up. I tilted the gun hard and the stock struck my hip as my hand slapped the trigger guard and trigger.

Rollie's gun had come up smoking but my finger closed on the trigger a split second before his slug hit me. It felt as if I had been kicked in the side, and I took a staggering step back, a rock rolling under my foot just enough to throw me out of the line of his second shot.

Then I fired again, having worked the lever unconsciously.

Rollie went back against the rocks and tried to bring his gun up. He fired as I did. The world weaved and waved before me, but Rollie was down on his face, great holes torn in his back where the .44 slugs had emerged. Turning, scarcely able to walk, I scrambled up the incline to my former position. My head was spinning and my eyes refused to focus, but the shots had startled the men and they were getting up. If they started after me now, I was through.

The ground seemed to dip and reel, but I got off a shot, then another. One man went down and the others vanished as if swallowed by the earth. Rolling over, my breath coming in ragged gasps, I ripped my shirttail off and plugged cloth into my wounds. I had to get away at all costs, but I could never climb back up to the cliff house, even if the way were open.

My rifle dragging, I crawled and slid to the buckskin. Twice I almost fainted from weakness. Pain was gripping my vitals, squeezing and knotting them. Somehow I got to my horse, grabbed a stirrup, managed to get a grip on the pommel and pulled myself into the saddle. Getting my rifle back into its scabbard, I got some piggin strings and tied myself into the saddle. Then I started the buckskin toward the wilderness, and away from my enemies.

Day was shooting crimson arrows into the vast bowl of the sky when my eyes opened again. My head swam with effort, and I stared about, seeing nothing familiar. Buck had stopped beside a small spring in a canyon. There was grass and a few trees, with not far away the ruin of a rockhouse. On the sand beside the spring was the track of a

[*Turn page*]

RELIEVES • HEADACHE
• NEURALGIA
• NEURITIS PAIN FAST
Here's Why...
Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.
ANACIN

mountain lion, several deer tracks and what might be a mountain sheep, but no cow, horse or human tracks.

Fumbling with swollen fingers, I untied the piggin strings and slid to the ground. Buck snorted and sidestepped, then put his nose down to me inquiringly. He drew back from the smell of stale clothes and dried blood, and I lay there, staring up at him, a crumpled human thing, my body raw with pain and weakness. "It's all right, Buck," I whispered. "We'll pull through! We've got to pull through!"

IV

OVER me the sky's high gray faded to pink shot with blood-red swords that swept the red into gold. As the sun crept up, I lay there, still beneath the wide sky, my body washed by a sea of dull pain that throbbed and pulsed in my muscles and veins. Yet deep within beat a deeper, stronger pulse, the pulse of the fighting man that would not let me die without fighting, that would not let me lie long without movement.

Turning over, using hand grasps of grass, I pulled myself to the spring and drank deep of the cool, clear, life-giving water. The wetness of it seemed to creep through all my tissues, bringing peace to my aching muscles and life to my starved body. To live I must drink, and I must eat, and my body must have rest and time to mend. Over and over these thoughts went through my mind, and over and over I said them, staring at my helpless hands.

With contempt I looked at them, hating them for their weakness. And then I began to fight for life in those fingers, willing them to movement, to strength. Slowly my left hand began to stir, to lift at my command, to grasp a stick.

Triumph went through me. I was not defeated! Triumph lent me strength, and from this small victory I went on to another—a bit of broken manzanita placed across the first, a handful of scraped up leaves, more sticks.

Soon I would have a fire.

I was a creature fighting for survival, wanting only to live and to fight. Through waves of delirium and weakness, I dragged myself to an aspen where I peeled bark for a vessel. Fainting there, coming to, struggling back to the place for my fire, putting the bark vessel together with clumsy fingers. With the bark vessel, a sort of box, I dipped into the water but had to drag it to the sand, lacking the strength to lift it up, almost crying with weakness and pain.

Lighting my fire, I watched the flames take hold. Then I got the bark vessel atop two rocks in the fire, and the flames rose around it. As long as the flames were below the water level of the vessel I knew the bark would not burn, for the heat was absorbed by the water inside. Trying to push a stick under the vessel I leaned too far and fainted.

WHEN next I opened my eyes the water was boiling. Pulling myself to a sitting position, I unbuckled my thick leather belt and let my guns fall back on the ground. Then carefully, I opened my shirt and tore off a corner of it. I soaked it in the boiling water and began to bathe my wounds. Gingerly working the cloth plugs free of the wounds, I extracted them. The hot water felt good, but the sight of the wound in my side was frightening. It was red and inflamed, but near as I could see as I bathed it, the bullet had gone through and touched nothing vital. The second slug had gone through the fleshy part of my thigh, and after bathing that wound also, I lay still for a while, regaining strength and soaking up the heat.

Nearby there was a patch of prickly pear, so I crawled to it and cut off a few big leaves, then I roasted them to get off the spines and bound the pulp against the wounds. Indians had used it to fight inflammations, and it might help. I found a clump of amolillo and dug some

of the roots, scraping them into hot water. They foamed up when stirred, and I drank the foamy water, remembering the Indians used the drink to carry off clotted blood, and a man's bullet wounds healed better after he drank it.

Then I made a meal of squaw cabbage and breadroot, not wanting to attempt getting at my saddlebags. Yet when evening came and my fever returned, I managed to call Buck to me and loosen the girths. The saddle dropped, bringing with it my bedroll and saddle bags. Then I hobbled Buck and got the bridle off.

The effort exhausted me so I crawled into my bedroll. My fever haunted the night with strange shapes, and guns seemed crashing about me. Men and darkness fought on the edge of my consciousness. Morgan Park . . . Jim Pinder . . . Rud Maclaren . . . and the sharply feral face of Bodie Miller.

The nuzzling of Buck awakened me in the cold light of day. "All right, Buck," I whispered. "I'm awake. I'm alive."

MY WEAKNESS horrified me. If my enemies found me they would not hesitate to kill me, and Buck must have left a trail easily followed. High up the canyon wall there was a patch of green, perhaps a break in the rock. Hiding my saddle under some brush, and taking with me my bedroll, saddlebags, rifle and rope, I dragged myself toward an eyebrow of trail up the cliff.

If there was a hanging valley up there it was just what I wanted. The buckskin wandered after me, more from curiosity than anything else. Getting atop a boulder I managed to slide onto his back, then kneed him up the steep trail. A mountain horse, he went willingly, and in a few minutes we had emerged into a high hanging valley.

A great crack in the rock, it was flat-floored and high-walled, yet the grass was rich and green. Somewhere water was running, and before me was a massive stone tower all of sixty feet high. Blackened by age and by fire, it stood beside a spring, quite obviously the same as that from which I had been drinking below. The hanging valley comprised not over three acres of land, seemingly enclosed on the far side, and almost enclosed on the side where I had entered.

The ancient Indians who built the tower had known a good thing when they saw it, for here was shelter and defense, grass, water, and many plants. Beside the tower some stunted maize, long since gone native, showed there had once been planting here. Nowhere was there any evidence that a human foot had trod here in centuries.

A week went slowly by, and nothing disturbed my camp. Able to walk a few halting steps, I explored the valley. The maize had been a fortunate discovery, for Indians had long used a mush made of the meal as an hourly application for bullet wounds. With this and other remedies my recovery became more rapid. The jerky gave out, but with snared rabbits and a couple of sage hens, I managed. And then I killed a deer, and with the wild vegetables growing about, I lived well.

Yet a devil of impatience was riding me. My ranch was in the hands of my enemies, and each day of absence made the chance of recovery grow less. Then, after two weeks I was walking, keeping watch from a lookout spot atop the cliff and rapidly regaining strength. On the sixteenth day of my absence I decided to make an effort to return.

The land through which I rode was utterly amazing. Towering monoliths of stone, long, serrated cliffs of salmon-colored sandstone, and nothing human. It was almost noon of the following day before the buckskin's ears lifted suddenly. It took several seconds for me to discover what drew his attention, and then I detected a lone rider. An hour later, from a pinnacle of rock near a tiny seep of water, the rider was drawing near, carefully examining the ground.

A surge of joy went through me. It was Olga Maclaren!

Stepping out from the shadow, I waited for her to see me, and she did, almost at once. How I must look, I could guess. My shirt was heavy with dust, torn by a bullet and my own hands. My face was covered with beard and my cheeks drawn and hollow, but the expression on her face was only of relief. "Matt?" Her voice was incredulous. "You're alive?"

"Did you think I'd die before we were married, daughter of Maclaren? Did you think I'd die before you had those sons I promised? Right now I'm coming back to claim my own."

"Back?" The worry on her face was obvious. "You must never go back! You're believed dead, so you are safe. Go away while there's time!"

"Did you think I'd run? Olga, I've been whipped by Morgan Park, shot by Rollie Pinder and attacked by the others, but Pinder is dead, and Park's time is coming. No, I made a promise to a fine old man named Ball, another one to myself, and one to you, and I'll keep them all. In my time I've backed up, I've side-stepped, and occasionally I've run, but always to come back and fight again."

She looked at me, and some of the fear seemed to leave her. Then she shook her head. "But you can't go back now. Jim Pinder has the Two Bar."

"Then he'll move," I promised her.

Olga had swung down from her horse and lifted my canteen. "You've water!" she exclaimed. "They all said no man could survive out there in that waste, even if he was not wounded."

"You believed them?"

"No." She hesitated. "I knew you'd be alive somewhere."

"You know your man then, Olga Maclaren. Does it mean that you love me, too?"

She hesitated and her eyes searched mine, but when I would have moved toward her she drew back, half-frightened. Her lips parting a little, her breast lifting suddenly as she caught her breath. "It isn't time for that now—please!"

It stopped me, knowing what she said was true. "You are sure you weren't trailed?"

She shook her head. "I've been careful. Every day."

"This isn't the first day you looked for me?"

"Oh, no." She looked at me, her eyes shadowed with worry. "I was afraid you were lying somewhere bloody and suffering." Her eyes studied me, noting the torn shirt, the pallor of my face. "And you have been."

"Rollie was good. He was very good."

"Then it *was* you who killed him?"

"Who else?"

"Canaval and Bodie Miller found him after they realized you were gone from the mesa where you pinned them down. Canaval was sure it had been you, but some of them thought it was the mountain boys."

"They've done no fighting for me although they wanted to. You'd best start back. I've work to do."

"But you're in no shape! You're sick!" She stared at me.

"I can still fight," I said. "Tell your father you've seen me. Tell him the Two Bar was given me in the presence of witnesses. Tell him his stock is to be off that range—at once!"

"You forget that I am my father's daughter!"

"And my future wife!"

"I've promised no such thing!" she flared. "You know I'd never marry you! I'll admit you're attractive, and you're a devil, but marry you? I'd die first!"

Her breast heaved and her eyes flashed and I laughed at her. "Tell your father, though, and ask him to withdraw from this fight before it's too late." Swinging into the saddle, I added. "It's already too late for you. You love me and you know it. Tell Morgan Park that, and tell him I'm coming back to break him with my hands!"

V

RIDING into Hattan's Point, I was a man well known. Rollie Pinder was dead, and they knew whose gun had downed him. Maclaren's riders had been held off and made a laughingstock, and I had taken up Ball's fight to hold his ranch. Some men hated me for this, some admired me, and many thought me a fool.

All I knew was the horse between my knees, the guns on my thighs and the blood of me pounding. My buckskin lifted his head high and moved down

the dusty street like a dancer, for riding into this town was a challenge to them all. They knew it and I knew it. Leaving my horse behind Mother O'Hara's, I walked to the saloon and went in.

By then I'd taken time to shave, and though the pallor of sickness was on my face, there was none in my eyes or heart. It did me good to see their eyes widen and to hear my spurs jingle as I walked to the bar. "Rye," I said, "the best you've got."

Key Chapin was there, and sitting with him, Morgan Park. The big man's eyes were cold as they stared at me. "I'm buying, gentlemen," I said, "and that includes you, Morgan Park, although you slug a man when his hands are down."

Park blinked. It had been a long time since anyone had told him off to his face. "And you, Key Chapin. It has always been my inclination to encourage freedom of the press and to keep my public relations on a good basis. And today I might even offer you a news item, something to read like this: Matt Sabre, of the Two Bar, was in town Friday afternoon. Matt is recovering from a bullet wound incurred during a minor dispute with Rollie Pinder, but is returning to the Two Bar to take up where he left off."

Chapin smiled. "That will be news to Jim Pinder. He didn't expect you back."

"He should have," I assured him. "I'm back to punish every murdering skunk who killed old man Ball."

All eyes were on me now, and Park was staring, not knowing what to make of me. "Do you know who they are?" Chapin asked curiously.

"Definitely!" I snapped the word. "Every man of them—" I shifted my eyes to Park—"is known—with one exception. When Ball was dying he named a man to me. Only I am not sure."

"Who?" demanded Chapin.

"Morgan Park," I said.

The big man came to his feet with a lunge. His brown face was ugly with hatred. "That's a lie!" he roared.

My shoulders lifted. "Probably a misunderstanding. I'll not take offense at your language, Mr. Park, because it is a dead man you are calling a liar, and not I. Ball might have meant that one of your riders, a man named Lyell, was there. He died before he could be questioned. If it is true I'll kill you after I whip you."

"Whip me?" Park's bellow was amazed. "*Whip me?* Why, you—"

"Unfortunately, I'm not sufficiently recovered from my wounds to do it today, but don't be impatient. You'll get your belly full of it when the time comes." Turning my back on him, I

lifted my glass. "Gentlemen, your health!" And then I walked out of the place.

THERE was the good rich smell of cooked food and coffee when I opened the door of Mother O'Hara's. "Ah? It's you then! And still alive! Things ain't what they used to be around here! Warned off by Maclaren, threatened by Jim Pinder, beaten by Morgan Park, and you're still here!"

"Still here an' stayin', Katie O'Hara," I said, grinning at her, "and I've just said that and more to Morgan Park."

"There's been men die, and you've had the killin' of some."

"That's the truth, Katie, but I'd rather it never happened, but it's a hard country and small chance for a man who hesitates to shoot when the time comes. All the same, it's a good country, this. A country where I plan to stay and grow my children, Katie. I'll go back to the Two Bar and build my home there."

"You think they'll let you? You think you can keep it?"

"They'll have no choice."

Behind me a door closed and the voice of Rud Maclaren was saying, "We'll have a choice. Get out of the country while you're alive!"

The arrogance in his voice angered me, so I turned and faced him. Canaval and Morgan Park had come with him. "The Two Bar is my ranch," I said, "and I'll be staying there. Do you think yourself a king that you can dictate terms to a citizen of a free country? You've let a small power swell your head, Maclaren. You think you have power when all you have is money. If you weren't the father of the girl I'm to marry, Maclaren, I'd break you just to show you this is a free country and we want no barons here."

His face mottled and grew hard. "Marry my daughter? *You?* I'll see you in Hell first!"

"If you see me in Hell, Maclaren," I said lightly, "you'll be seeing a married man, because I'm marrying Olga and you can like it or light a shuck! I expect you were a good man once, but there's some that cannot stand the taste of power, and you're one."

My eyes shifted to Morgan Park. "And there's another beside you. He has let his beef get him by too long. He uses force where you use money, but his time is running out, too. He couldn't break me when he had the chance, and when my times comes, I'll break him."

More than one face in the room was approving, even if they glared at me, these two. "The trouble is obvious," I continued. "You've never covered enough country. You think you're sitting in the center of the world whereas you're just a couple of two-bit operators in a forgotton corner."

Turning my back on them I helped myself to the Irish stew. Maclaren went out, but Park came around the table and sat down, and he was smiling. The urge climbed up in me to beat the big face off him and down him in the dirt as he had me. He was wider than me by inches, and taller. The size of his wrists and hands was amazing, yet he was not all beef, for he had brains and there was trouble in him, trouble for me.

WHEN I returned to my horse there was a man sitting there. He looked up and I was astonished at him. His face was like an unhappy monkey and he was without a hair to the top of his head. Near as broad in the shoulders as Morgan Park, he was shorter than me by inches. "By the look of you," he said, "you'll be Matt Sabre."

"You're right, man. What is it about?"

"Katie O'Hara was a-tellin' me it was a man you needed at the Two Bar. Now I'm a handy all-around man, Mr. Sabre, a rough sort of gunsmith, hostler, blacksmith, carpenter, good with an ax. An' I shoot a bit, know Cornish style wrestlin' an' am afraid of no man when

I've my two hands before me. I'm not so handy with a short gun, but I've a couple of guns of my own that I handle nice."

He got to his feet, and he could have been nothing over five feet four but weighed all of two hundred pounds, and his shirt at the neck showed a massive chest covered with black hair and a neck like a column of oak. "The fact that you've the small end of a fight appeals to me." He jerked his head toward the door. "Katie has said I'm to go to work for you an' she'd not take it kindly if I did not."

"You're Katie's man, then?"

His eyes twinkled amazingly. "Katie's mon? I'm afraid there's no such. She's a broth of a woman, that one." He grinned up at me. "Is it a job I have?"

"When I've the ranch back," I agreed, "you've a job."

"Then let's be gettin' it back. Will you wait for me? I've a mule to get."

The mule was a dun with a face that showed all the wisdom, meanness and contrariness that have been the traits of the mule since time began. With a tow sack behind the saddle and another before him, we started out of town. "My name is Brian Mulvaney," he said. "Call me what you like."

HE GRINNED widely when he saw me staring at the butts of the two guns that projected from his boottops. "These," he said, "are the Neal Bootleg pistol, altered by me to suit my taste. The caliber is .35, but good. Now this —" from his waistband he drew a gun that lacked only wheels to make an admirable artillery piece—"this was a Mills .75 caliber. Took me two months of work off and on but I've converted her to a four-shot revolver. A fine gun," he added.

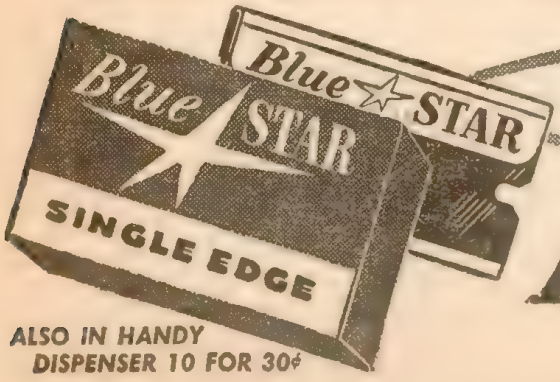
All of seventeen inches long, it looked fit to break a man's wrists, but Mul-

[*Turn page*]

A Dollar's Worth of Shaving Pleasure *for a Dime!*

Smoother, easier, faster shaves every time because Blue Star Blades are ground and honed in oil

Try a Blue Star Blade on hard-to-shave spots. See how much shaving pleasure it gives you for so little money. Shave and save with Blue Star today.



ALSO IN HANDY DISPENSER 10 FOR 30¢

ONLY 10¢ A PACKAGE

Blue STAR

SINGLE EDGE RAZOR BLADES

PRECISION ASR PRODUCTS

AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BROOKLYN 1, N. Y.

vaney had powerful hands and arms. No man ever hit by a chunk of lead from that gun would need a doctor.

Four horses were in the corral at the Two Bar, and the men were strongly situated behind a log barricade. Mulvaney grinned at me. "What'd you suppose I've in this sack, laddie?" he demanded, his eyes twinkling. "I, who was a miner also?"

"Powder?"

"Exactly! In those new-fangled sticks. Now unless it makes your head ache too much, help me cut a few o' these sticks in half." When that was done he cut the fuses very short and slid caps into the sticks of powder. "Come now, me boy, an' we'll slip down close under the cover o' darkness, an' you'll see them takin' off like you never dreamed!"

Crawling as close as we dared, each of us lit a fuse and hurled a stick of powder. My own stick must have landed closer to them than I planned, for we heard a startled exclamation followed by a yell. Then a terrific explosion blasted the night apart. Mulvaney's followed, and then we hastily hurled a third and a fourth.

One man lunged over the barricade and started straight for us. The others had charged the corral. The man headed our way suddenly saw us and wheeling, he fled as if the devil was after him. Four riders gripping only mane holds dashed from the corral, and then there was silence. Mulvaney got to his feet chuckling. "For guns they'd have stood until hell froze over, but the powder, the flyin' rocks an' dust scared 'em good. An' you've your ranch back."

WE HAD eaten our midday meal the next day, when I saw a rider approaching. It was Olga Maclaren. "Nice to see you," I said, aware of the sudden tension her presence always inspired.

She was looking toward the foundation we had laid for the new house. It was on a hill with the long sweep of Cottonwood Wash before it. "You should be more careful," she said. "You had a visitor last night."

"We just took over last night," I objected. "Who do you mean?"

"Morgan. He was out here shortly after our boys got home. They met the bunch you stampeded from here."

"He's been puzzling me," I admitted. "Who is he? Did he come from around here?"

"I don't know. He's not talkative, but I've heard him mention places back East. I know he's been in Philadelphia and New York, but nothing else about him except that he goes to Salt Lake and San Francisco occasionally."

"Not back East?"

"Never since we've known him."

"You like him?"

She looked up at me. "Yes, Morgan can be very wonderful. He knows a lot about women and the things that please them." There was a flicker of laughter in her eyes. "He probably doesn't know as much about them as you."

"Me?" I was astonished. "What gave you that idea?"

"Your approach that first day. You knew it would excite my curiosity, and a man less sure of himself would never have dared. If you knew no more about women than most Western men you would have hung back, wishing you could meet me, or you would have got drunk to work up your courage."

"I meant what I said that day. You're going to marry me."

"Don't say that. Don't even think it. You've no idea what you are saying or what it would mean."

"Because of your father?" I looked at her. "Or Morgan Park?"

"You take him too lightly, Matt. I think he is utterly without scruple. I believe he would stop at nothing."

There was more to come and I was interested.

"There was a young man here from the East," she continued, "and I liked him. Knowing Morgan, I never mentioned him in Morgan's presence. Then one day he asked me about him. He added that it would be better for all

concerned if the man did not come around any more. Inadvertently I mentioned the young man's name, Arnold D'Arcy.

"When he heard that name he became very disturbed. Who was he? Why had he come here? Had he asked any questions about anybody? Or described anybody he might be looking for? He asked me all those questions, but at the same time I thought little about it. Afterwards I began to believe that he was not merely jealous. Right then I decided to tell Arnold about it when he returned."

"And did you?"

There was a shadow of worry on her face. "No. He never came again." She looked quickly at me. "I've often thought of it. Morgan never mentioned him again, but somehow Arnold hadn't seemed like a man who would frighten easily."

Later, when she was mounting to leave, I asked her, "Where was D'Arcy from? Do you remember?"

"Virginia, I believe. He had served in the Army, and before coming West had been working in Washington."

Watching her go, I thought again of Morgan Park. He might have frightened D'Arcy away, but I could not shake off the idea that something vastly more sinister lay behind it. And Park had been close to us during the night. If he had wanted to kill me, it could have been done, but apparently he wanted me alive. Why?

"Mulvaney," I suggested, "if you can hold this place, I'll ride to Silver Reef and get off a couple of messages."

He stretched his huge arms and grinned at me. "Do you doubt it? I'll handle it or them. Go, and have yourself a time."

And in the morning I was in the saddle again.

VI

HIGH noon, and a mountain shaped like flame. Beyond the mountain and around it was a wide land with no horizons, but only the shimmering heat waves that softened all lines to vagueness and left the desert an enchanted land without beginning and without end.

As I rode, my mind studied the problem created by the situation around Cottonwood Wash. There were at least three, and possibly four sides to the question. Rud Maclaren with his Bar M, Jim Pinder with his CP, and myself with the Two Bar. The fourth possibility was Morgan Park.

Olga's account of Arnold D'Arcy's disappearance had struck a chord of memory. During ten years of my life I had been fighting in foreign wars, and there had been a military observer named D'Arcy, a Major Leo D'Arcy, who had been in China during the fighting there. It stuck in my mind that he had a brother named Arnold.

It was a remote chance, yet a possibility. Why did the name upset Park? What had become of Arnold? Where did Park come from? Pinder could be faced with violence and handled with violence. Maclaren might be circumvented.

Morgan Park worried me.

SILVER REEF lay sprawled in haphazard comfort along a main street and a few cross streets. There were the usual frontier saloons, stores, churches and homes. The sign on the Elk Horn Saloon caught my attention. Crossing to it I pushed through the door into the dim interior. While the bartender served me, I glanced around, liking the feel of the place.

"Rye?" The smooth-pated bartender squinted at me.

"Uh-huh. How's things in the mines?"

"So-so. But you ain't no miner." He glanced at my cowhand's garb and then at the guns in their tied-down holsters. "This here's a quiet town. We don't see many gun handlers around here. The place for them is over east of here."

"Hattan's?"

"Yeah. I hear the Bar M an' CP both

are hirin' hands. Couple of hombres from there rode into town a few days ago. One of 'em was the biggest man I ever did see."

Morgan Park in Silver Reef! That sounded interesting, but I kept a tight rein on my thoughts and voice. "Did he say anything about what was goin' on over there?"

"Not to me. The feller with him, though, he was inquirin' around for the Slade boys. Gunslicks both of them. The big feller, he never come in here atall. I seen him on the street a couple of times, but he went to the Wells Fargo Bank and down the street to see that shyster, Jake Booker."

"You don't seem to like Booker?"

"Him? He's plumb no good! The man's a crook!"

Once started on Booker, the bartender told me a lot. Morgan Park had been in town before, but never came to the Elk Horn. He confined his visits to the back room of a dive called the Sump or occasional visits to the office of Jake Booker. The only man who ever came with him was Lyell.

Leaving the saloon, I sent off my telegram to Leo D'Arcy. Then I located the office of Booker, spotted the Sump, and considered the situation. Night came swiftly and miners crowded the street, a good-natured shoving, pushing, laughing throng, jamming the saloons and drinking. The crowd relaxed me with its rough good humor, and for the night I fell into it, drifting, joking, listening.

TURNING off the street near Louder's store I passed the street lamp on the corner, and for an instant was outlined in its radiance. From the shadows, flame stabbed. There was a tug at my sleeve, and then my own gun roared, and as the shot sped, I went after it.

A man lunged from the side of the store and ran staggeringly toward the alley behind it. Pistol ready, I ran after him. He wheeled, slipped, and was running again. He brought up with a crash against the corral bars and fell. He was crawling to his feet, and I caught a glimpse of his face in the glow from the window. It was Lyell.

One hand at his throat, I jerked him erect. His face was gaunt and there was blood on his shirt front. He had been hit hard by my sudden, hardly aimed shot. "Got you, didn't I?"

"Yes, damn you, an' I missed. Put —put me down."

Lowering him to the ground, I dropped to one knee. "I'll get a doctor. I saw a sign up the street."

He grabbed my sleeve. "Ain't no use. I feel it. You got me good. Anyway—" he stared at me—"why should you get a doc for me?"

"I shouldn't. You were in the gang killed Ball."

His eyes bulged. "No! No, I wasn't there! He was a good old man! I wasn't in that crowd."

"Was Morgan Park there?"

His eyes changed, veiled. "Why would he be there? That wasn't his play."

"What's he seeing Booker for? What about Sam Slade?"

Footsteps crunched on the gravel, and a man carrying a lantern came up the alley. "Get a doctor, will you? This man's been shot."

The man started off at a run and Lyell lay quiet, a tough, unshaven man with brown eyes. He breathed hoarsely for several minutes while I uncovered the wound. "The Slades are to get Canaval. Park wants you for himself."

"What does he want? Range?"

"No. He—he wants money."

The doctor hurried up with the lantern carrier. Watching him start work, I backed away and disappeared in the darkness. If anybody knew anything about Park's plans it would be Booker, and I had an idea I could get into Booker's office.

Booker's office was on the second floor of a frame building reached by an outside stairway. Once up there a man would be fairly trapped if anyone came

up those stairs. Down the street a music box was jangling, and the town showed no signs of going to sleep. Studying that stairway, I liked no part of it. Booker had many friends here, but I had none, and going up there would be a risk. Then I remembered all the other times I'd had no friends, so I hitched my guns easier on my thighs and went across the street.

Going up the steps two at a time, I paused at the door. Locks were no problem to a man of my experience, and a minute later I was inside a dark office, musty with stale tobacco. Swiftly, I checked the tray on the desk, the top drawer and then the side drawers, lighting my exploration with a stump of candle. Every sense alert, ears attuned to the slightest sound, I worked rapidly, suddenly coming to an assayer's report. No location was mentioned, no notation on the sheet, but the ore had been rich, amazingly rich. Then among some older papers at the bottom of a drawer I found a fragment of a letter from Morgan Park, signed with his name.

> You have been recommended to me as a man of discretion who could turn over a piece of property for a quick profit and who could handle negotiations with a buyer. I am writing for an appointment and will be in Silver Reef on the 12th. It is essential that this business remain absolutely confidential.

It was little enough, but a hint. I left the assayer's report but pocketed the letter. The long ride had tired me, for my wounds, while much improved, had robbed me of strength. Dousing the candle, I returned it to its shelf. And then I heard a low mutter of voices and steps on the stair!

BACKING swiftly, I glanced around and saw a closed door that must lead to an inner room. Stepping through it I closed it just in time. It was a room used for storage. Voices sounded and a door closed. A match scratched, and light showed under the door. "Nonsense! Probably got in some drunken brawl! You're too suspicious, Morgan."

"Maybe, but the man worries me. He rides too much, and he may get to nosing around and find something."

"Did you see Lyell before he died?"

"No. He shot first, though. Some fool saw him take a bead on somebody. This other fellow followed it up and killed him."

The crabbed voice of Booker interrupted. "Forget him. Forget Sabre. My men are lined up and they have the cold cash ready to put on the line! We haven't any time for child's play! I've done my part and now it's up to you! Get Sabre out of the way and get rid of Maclaren!"

"That's not so easy," Park objected stubbornly. "Maclaren is never alone, and if anybody ever shot at him he'd turn the country upside down to find the man. And after he is killed, the minute we step in suspicion will be diverted to us."

"Nonsense!" Booker replied irritably. "Nobody knows we've had dealings. They'll have to settle the estate, and I'll step in as representative of the buyers. Of course, if you were married to the girl it would simplify things. What's the matter? Sabre cutting in there, too?"

"Shut up!" Park's voice was ugly. "If you ever say a thing like that again, I'll wring you out like a dirty towel, Booker. I mean it."

"You do your part," Booker said, "and I'll do mine. The buyers have the money and they are ready. They won't wait forever."

A chair scraped, and Park's heavy steps went to the door and out. There was a faint squeak of a cork twisting in a bottle neck, the gurgle of a poured drink, then the bottle and glass returned to the shelf. The light vanished and a door closed. Then footsteps grated on the gravel below. Only a minute behind him, I hurried from the vicinity, then paused sweating despite the cool air. Thinking of what I'd heard, I re-

trieved my horse and slipped quietly out of town. Bedded down among the clustering cedars, I thought of that, and then of Olga, the daughter of Maclaren, of her soft lips, the warmth of her arms, the quick proud lift of her chin.

COMING home to Cottonwood Wash and the Two Bar with the wind whispering through the greasewood and rustling the cottonwood leaves, I kept a careful watch but saw nobody until Mulvaney himself stepped into sight.

"Had any trouble?" I asked him.

"Trouble? None here," he replied. "Some men came by, but the sound of my Spencer drove them away again." He walked to the door. "There's grub on the table. How was it in Silver Reef?"

"A man killed."

"Be careful, lad. There's too many dying."

When I had explained, he nodded. "Do they know it was you?"

"I doubt it." It felt good to be back on my own place again, seeing the white-faced cattle browsing in the pasture below, seeing the water flowing to irrigate the small garden we'd started.

"You're tired." Mulvaney studied me. "But you look fit. You've thrown a challenge in the teeth of Park. You'll be backing it up?"

"Backing it up?" My eyes must have told what was in me. "That's one man I want, Mulvaney! He had me down and beat me, and I'll not live free until I whip him or he whips me fair!"

"He's a power of man, lad. I've seen him lift a barrel of whiskey at arm's length overhead. It will be a job to whip him."

"Ever box any, Mulvaney? You told me you'd wrestled Cornish style."

"What Irishman hasn't boxed a bit? Is it a sparrin' mate you're wantin'? Sure'n it would be good to get the leather on my maulies again."

For a week we were at it, every night we boxed, lightly at first, then faster. He was a brawny man, a fierce slugger and a powerful man in the clinches. On the seventh day we did a full thirty minutes without a break. And in the succeeding days my strength returned and my speed grew greater. The rough and tumble part of it I loved. Nor was I worried about Morgan knowing more tricks than I—the waterfronts are the place to learn the dirty side of fighting. I would use everything I'd learned there, if Morgan didn't fight fair.

It was after our tenth session with the gloves that Mulvaney stripped them off and shook his head admiringly. "Faith, lad, you've a power of muscle behind that wallop of yours! That last one came from nowhere and I felt it clean to my toes! Never did I believe a man lived that could hit like that!"

"Thanks," I said. "I'm ridin' to town tomorrow."

"To fight him?"

"No, to see the girl, Olga Maclaren, to buy supplies, and perhaps to ride him a little. I want him furious before we fight. I want him mad, mad and wild."

He nodded wisely at me. "It'll help, for no man can fight unless he keeps his head. But be careful, lad. Remember they are gunnin' for you, an' there's nothin' that would better please them than to see you dead on the ground."

WHEN the buckskin was watered I returned him to the hitchrail and walked into the saloon. Hattan's Point knew that Lyell was dead, but they had no idea who had done it. Key Chapin was the first man I met, and I looked at him, wondering on which side he stood.

He looked at me curiously and motioned toward the chair across the table from him. Dropping into it, I began to build a smoke. "Well, Sabre, you're making quite a name for yourself."

I shrugged. "That's not important. All I want is a ranch."

"All?"

"And a girl."

"One may be as hard to get as the other."

"Maybe. Anyway, I've made a start on the ranch. In fact, I have the ranch and intend to keep it."

"Heard about Lyell?"

"Killed, wasn't he? Somewhere west of here?"

"At Silver Reef. It's a peaceful, quiet town in spite of being a boomtown. And they have a sheriff over there who believes in keeping it peaceful. They tell me he is working hard to find out who killed Lyell."

"It might be anybody. There was a rumor that he was one of the men in the raid on the Ball ranch."

"And which you promised to bury on the spot."

What this was building to I did not know, but I was anxious to find out just where Chapin stood. He would be a good friend to have, and a bad enemy, for his paper had a good deal of influence around town.

"You told me when I first came here that the town was taking sides. Which is your side?"

HE HESITATED, toying with his glass. "That's a harder question to answer since you came," he replied frankly. "I will say this. I am opposed to violence. I believe now is the time to establish a peaceful community, and I believe it can be done. For that reason I am opposed to the CP outfit whose code is violence."

"And Maclaren?"

He hesitated again. "Maclaren can be reasoned with at times. Stubborn, yes, but only because he has an exaggerated view of his own rightness. It is not easy to prove him wrong, but it can be done."

"And Park?"

He looked at me sharply, a cool, measuring glance as if to see what inspired the remark. Then he said, "Morgan Park is generally felt to see things as Maclaren does."

"Is that your opinion?"

He did not answer me, frowning as he stared out the door. Key Chapin was a handsome man, and an able one. I could understand how he felt about law and order. Basically, I agreed with him, but when I'm attacked, I can't take it lying down.

"Look, Chapin"—I leaned over the table—"I've known a dozen frontier towns tougher than this one. To each came law and order, but it took a fight to get them. The murderers, cheats and swindlers must be stamped out before the honest citizens can have peace. And it's peace that I'm fighting for. You, more than anybody else, can build the situation to readiness for it with your paper. Write about it. Get the upright citizens prepared to enforce it, once this battle is over."

He nodded, then glanced at me. "What about you? You're a gunfighter. In such a community there is no place for such a man."

That made me grin. "Chapin, I never drew a gun on a man in my life who didn't draw on me first, or try to! And while I may be a gun fighter, I'm soon to be a rancher and a solid citizen. Count on me to help."

"Even to stopping this war?"

"What war? Ball had a ranch. He was a peaceful old man who wanted no trouble from anyone, but he was weaker than the Bar M or the CP so he died. He turned the ranch over to me on the condition that I keep it. If protecting one's property is war, then we'll have it for a long time."

"You could sell out."

"Run? Is that what you mean? I never ducked out of a good fight yet, Chapin, and never will. When they stop fighting me, I'll hang up my guns. Until then, I shall continue to fight."

Filling my glass, I added, "Don't look at the overall picture so long that you miss the details."

"What do you mean?"

"Look for motives. What are the origins of this fight? I'd start investigating the participants, and I mean neither Maclaren nor Pinder!"

Getting up, I put my hat on my head and added, "Ever hear of a man named Booker at Silver Reef? A lawyer?"

"He's an unmitigated scoundrel, and whatever he does he's apt to get away with. If there's a loophole in the law he doesn't know, then nobody knows it."

"Then find out why he's interested in this fight, and when the Slade boys drift into this country, ask yourself why they are here. Also, ask yourself why Morgan Park is meeting Booker in secret."

Olga was not in town so I turned the buckskin toward the Bar M. A cowhand with one foot bandaged was seated on the doorstep when I rode up. He stared, his jaw dropping.

"Howdy," I said calmly, taking out the makings. "I'm visiting on the ranch and don't want any trouble. As far as you boys are concerned, I've no hard feelings."

"*You've* no hard feelin's! What about me? You durned near shot my foot off!"

I grinned at him. "Next time you'll stay under cover. Anyway, what are you gripin' about? You haven't done a lick of work since it happened!"

SOMEBODY chuckled. I looked around and saw Canaval. "I reckon he did it on purpose, Sabre."

"*Excuse?*" The injured man roared. Disgusted, he turned and limped off.

"What you want here, Sabre?" Canaval asked, still smiling.

"Just visiting."

"Sure you're welcome?"

"No, I'm not sure. But if you're wondering if I came looking for trouble, I didn't. If trouble comes to me on this ranch now it will be because I'm pushed and pushed hard. If you're the guardian angel of peace, just relax. I'm courtin'."

"Rud won't take kindly to that. He may have me order you off."

"All right, Canaval, if he does, and you tell me to go, I'll go. Only one thing—you keep Park off me. I'm not ready for him, and when it comes I'd rather she didn't see it."

"Fair enough." He tossed his cigarette into the yard. "You'll not be bothered under those circumstances. Only—" he grinned and his eyes twinkled—"you might be wrong about Olga. She might like to see you tangle with Park!"

Starting up the steps, I remembered something. "Canaval!"

He turned sharply, ready on the instant.

"A friendly warning," I said. "Some of the people who don't like me also want your boss out of here. To get him out, you have to go first. If you hear of the Slades in this country, you'll know they've come for you and your boss!"

His eyes searched mine. "The Slades?"

"Yeah, for you and Maclaren. Somebody is saving me for dessert."

He was standing there looking after me when I knocked. Inside a voice answered that set my blood pounding. "Come in!"

VII

AS I entered there was an instant when my reflection was thrown upon the mirror beside hers. Seeing my gaze over her shoulder, she turned, and we stood there, looking at ourselves in the mirror—a tall, dark young man in a dark blue shirt, black silk neckerchief, black jeans, and tied-down holsters with their walnut-stocked guns, and Olga in a sea-green gown, filmy and summery-looking.

She turned quickly to face me. "What

are you doing here? My father will be furious!"

"He'll have to get over it sometime, and it might as well be right now."

She searched my face. "You're still keeping up that foolish talk? About marrying me?"

"It isn't foolish. Have you started buying your trousseau?"

"Of course not!"

"You'd better. You'll need something to wear, and I won't have much money for a year or two."

"Matt—" her face became serious—"you'd better go. I'm expecting Morgan."

I took her hands. "Don't worry. I promised Canaval there would be no trouble, and there will be none, no matter what Morgan Park wants to do or tries to do."

She was unconvinced and tried to argue but I was thinking how lovely she was. Poised, her lovely throat bare, she was something to set a man's pulses pounding.

"Matt!" She was angry now. "You're not even listening! And don't look at me like that!"

"How else should a man look at a woman? And why don't we sit down? Is this the way you receive guests at the Bar M? At the Two Bar we are more thoughtful."

"So I've heard!" she said dryly. Her anger faded. "Matt? How do you feel? I mean those wounds? Are they all right?"

"Not all right, but much better. I'm not ready for Morgan Park yet, but I will be soon. He won't be missed much when he's gone."

"Gone?" She was surprised. "Remember that I like Morgan."

"Not very much." I shrugged. "Yes, gone. This country isn't big enough to hold both of us even if you weren't in it."

SHE sat down opposite me and her face was flushed a little. She looked at me, then looked away, and neither of us said anything for a long minute. "It's nice here," I said at last. "Your father loves this place, doesn't he?"

"Yes, only I wish he would be content and stop trying to make it bigger."

"Men like your father never seem to learn when they have enough."

"You don't talk like a cowhand, Matt."

"That's because I read a book once."

"Key told me you had been all over the world. He checked up on you. He said you had fought in China and South Africa."

"That was a long time ago."

"How did you happen to come West?"

"I was born in the West, and then I always wanted to return to it and have a ranch of my own, but there wasn't anything to hold me down, so I just kept on drifting from place to place. Staying in one place did not suit me unless there was a reason to stay, and there never was—before."

Tendrils of her dark hair curled against her neck. The day was warm, and I could see tiny beads of perspiration on her upper lip. She stood up suddenly, uneasily. "Matt, you'd better go. Father will be coming and he'll be furious."

"And Morgan Park will be coming. And it doesn't matter in the least whether they come or not. I came here to see you, and as long as they stay out of the way there'll be no trouble."

"But, Matt—" She stepped closer to me, and I took her by the elbows. She started to step back, but I drew her to me swiftly. I took her chin and turned her head slightly. She resisted, but the continued pressure forced her chin to come around. She looked at me then, her eyes wide and more beautiful than I would ever have believed eyes could be, and then I kissed her.

We stood there, clinging together tightly, and then she pulled violently away from me. For an instant she looked at me, and then she moved swiftly to kiss me again, and we were like that when hoofs sounded in the yard. Two horses.

We stepped apart, but her eyes were wide and her face was pale when they came through the door, her breast heaving and her white teeth clinging to her lower lip. They came through the door, Rud Maclaren first, and then Morgan Park, dwarfing Maclaren in spite of the fact that he was a big man. When they saw me they stopped.

Park's face darkened with angry blood. He started toward me, his voice hoarse with fury. "Get out! Get *out*, I say!"

MY EYES went past him to Maclaren. "Is Park running this place, or are you? It seems to me he's got a lot of nerve, ordering people off the place of Rud Maclaren."

Maclaren flushed. He didn't like my being there, but he disliked Park's usurping of authority even more. "That'll do, Morgan! I'll order people out of my own home!"

Morgan Park's face was ugly at that minute. But before he could speak, Canaval appeared in the door. "Boss, Sabre said he was visitin', not huntin' trouble. He said he would make no trouble and would go when I asked him. He also said he would make no trouble with Park."

Before Maclaren could reply, Olga said quickly, "Father, Mr. Sabre is my guest. When the time comes he will leave. Until then I wish him to stay."

"I won't have him in this house!" Maclaren said angrily. He strode to me, the veins in his throat swelling. "Damn you, Sabre! You've a gall to come here after shootin' my men, stealin' range that rightly belongs to me, an' runnin' my cattle out of Cottonwood!"

"Perhaps," I admitted, "there's something in what you say, but I think we have no differences we can't settle without fighting. Your men came after me first. I never wanted trouble with you, Rud, and I think we can reach a peaceful solution."

It took the fire out of him. He was still truculent, still wanting to throw his weight around, but mollified. Right then I sensed the truth about Rud Maclaren. It was not land and property he wanted so much as to be known as the biggest man in the country. He merely knew of no way to get respect and admiration other than through wealth and power.

Realizing that gave me an opening. "I was talking to Chapin today. If we are going to be safe we must stop all this fighting, and the only way it can be done is through the leadership of the right man. I think you're that man, Maclaren."

He was listening, and he liked what he heard.

"You're the big man of the community," I added. "If you make a move for peace, others will follow."

"The Pinders wouldn't listen!" he protested. "You know that! You killed Rollie, but if you hadn't, Canaval might have. Jim will never rest until you're dead. And he hates me and all I stand for."

Morgan Park was listening, his eyes hard and watchful. He had never imagined that Maclaren and I would talk peace, and if we reached a settlement, his plans were finished.

"If Pinder and the CP were alone they would have to become outlaws to persist in this fight. If the fight continues all the rustlers in the country will come in here to run off our herds while we fight. Did it ever fail? When honest men fall out, thieves always profit. Moreover, you'll break yourself paying gunman's wages. From now on they'll come higher."

OLGA was listening with some surprise, and I believed, with respect. Certainly, I had gone farther than I had ever believed possible. My own instinct is toward fighting, yet I have always been aware of the futility of it. Now I could see that if the fighting ended, all our problems would be simple and easily settled. The joker in the deck was Morgan Park; he had everything

to lose by a settlement, and nothing to gain.

Park interrupted suddenly. "I wouldn't trust all this talk, Rud. Sabre sounds good, but he's got some trick in mind. What's he planning? What's he trying to cover?"

"Morgan!" Olga protested. "I'm surprised at you! Matt is sincere and you know it."

"I know nothing of the kind," he replied shortly. "I'm surprised that you would defend this—this killer."

He was looking at me as he spoke, and it was then I said the one thing I had wanted to say, the hunch I could not prove. "At least," I replied, "my killings have been in fair fights, by men trying to kill me. I've never killed a man who had no gun, and who would have been helpless against me in any case!"

Morgan Park stiffened and his face grew livid. Yet I knew from the way his eyes searched my face that he detected the undercurrent of meaning and he was trying to gauge the depth of my knowledge. It was D'Arcy I had in mind, for D'Arcy had known something about Park and had been slain for what he knew, or because he might tell others what he knew. I was sure of that.

"It isn't only rustlers," I continued, to Maclaren, "but others have schemes they can only bring to success through trouble here. There are those who wish this fight to continue so they may get rights and claims they could never secure if there was peace."

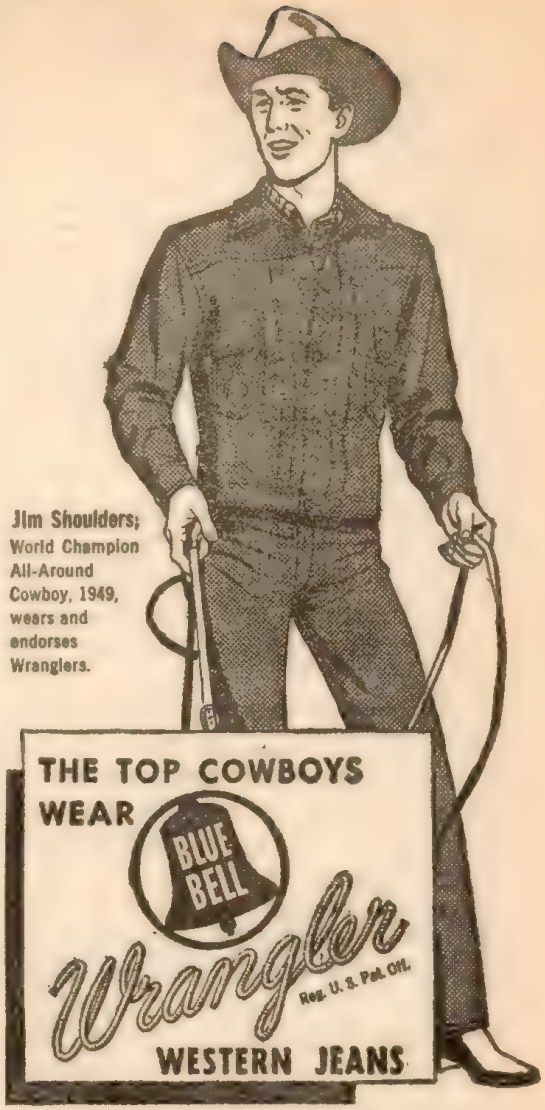
Morgan Park was glaring, fighting for control. He could see that unless he kept his temper and acted quickly his plans might be ruined. Something of what I'd said apparently touched Maclaren, for he was nodding.

"I'll have to think it over," Maclaren said. "This is no time to make decisions."

"By all means." Turning, I took Olga's arm. "Now if you'll excuse us?"

Morgan's face was a study in con-

[*Turn page*]


Jim Shoulders; World Champion All-Around Cowboy, 1949, wears and endorses Wranglers.
THE TOP COWBOYS WEAR
BLUE BELL
Wrangler
Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.
WESTERN JEANS

Many other Rodeo Cowboys Association champions wear Wranglers, including:

Todd Whatley, All-Around World Champion, 1947
Gerald Roberts, All-Around World Champ., 1948
Casey Tibbs, World Saddle Bronc Rid. Champ., '49
Bill Linderman, Runner-up World Champion, 1949

BLUE BELL WRANGLERS are tough and rugged. Made of heaviest 11-oz. Sanforized denim. Won't shrink out of fit. Styled by Rodeo Ben, custom tailor to top cowboys and ranchers. Men's and boys' sizes — **zipper or button front.** Women's Wranglers, 8 oz. wt., for trim figures, sizes 12 through 20. *Each* garment in Blue Bell's complete line of work and play clothes is guaranteed the best made, best fitting you can buy—*or your money back!*

BLUE BELL, Inc., Greensboro, N. C.
WORLD'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF WORK CLOTHES

centrated fury. He started forward, blood in his eye. Putting Olga hurriedly to one side, I was ready for him, but Canaval stepped between us. *"Hold it!"* Canaval's command stopped Park in his tracks. "That's all, Park. We'll have no trouble here."

"What's the matter?" he sneered. "Sabre need a nursemaid now?"

"No." The foreman was stiff. "He gave me his word, and I gave mine. As long as he is on this place my word holds. If the boss wants him to go, he'll go."

IN THE silence that followed, Maclaren turned to me. "Sabre, I've no reason to like you, but you are my daughter's guest and you talk straight from the shoulder. Remain as long as you like."

Park started to speak, but realized he could do nothing. He turned his heavy head, staring at me from under heavy brows. That gaze was cold and deadly. "We can settle our differences elsewhere, Sabre."

Olga was worried when we got outside. "You shouldn't have come, Matt. There'll be trouble. Morgan is a bad enemy."

"He was my enemy, anyway. That he is a bad enemy, I know. I think another friend of yours found that out."

She looked up quickly, real fear in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Your friend D'Arcy. He comes of a family that does not frighten easily. Did you ever have a note of acknowledgement from him?"

"No."

"Strange. I'd have said such a man would never neglect such an obvious courtesy."

We stood together then, looking out at the night and the desert, no words between us but needing no words, our hearts beating together, our blood moving together, feeling the newness of love discovered. The cottonwood leaves brushed their pale green hands together, and their muted whispering seemed in tune with our own thoughts. This was my woman. The one I would walk down the years with. The leaves said that and my blood said it, and I knew the same thoughts were in her, reluctant as she might be to admit it.

"This trouble will pass," I said softly, "as the night will pass, and when it has gone, and the winds have blown the dust away, then I shall take you to Cottonwood Wash—to live." Her hand stayed in mine, and I continued, "We'll build something there to last down the years until this will all seem a bad dream, a nightmare dissipated by the morning sunlight."

"But could you ever settle down? Could you stay?"

"Of course. Men don't wander for the love only of wandering, they wander because they are in search of something. A place of one's own, a girl, a job accomplished. It is only you who has mattered since the day I rode into the streets of Hattan's Point and saw you there."

TURNING toward her, I took her by the elbows and her breath caught, then came quickly and deeply, her lips parted slightly as she came into my arms, and I felt her warm body melt against mine, and her lips were warm and seeking, urgent, passionate. My fingers ran into her hair and along her scalp, and her kisses hurt my lips as mine must have hurt hers. All the fighting, all the waiting melted into nothingness then.

She pulled back suddenly, frightened yet excited, her breasts rising and falling as she fought for control. "This isn't good! We're—we're too violent. We've got to be more calm."

I laughed then, full of the zest of living and loving and seeing the glory of her there in the moonlight. I laughed and took her arms again. "You're not exactly a calm person."

"I?" A flush darkened her face. "Well, all right then. Neither of us is calm."

"Need we be?" My hands reached for

her, and then I heard someone whistling and irritably I looked up to hear feet grating on the gravel path.

It was Canaval. "Better ride," he said. "I wouldn't put it past Park to drygulch a man."

"Canaval!" Olga protested. "How can you say that?"

His slow eyes turned to her. "You think so, too, ma'am. You always was an uncommon smart girl. You've known him for what he was for a mighty long time." He turned back to me. "Mean what you said back there? About peace and all?"

"You bet I did. What can we gain by fighting?"

"You're right," Canaval agreed, "but there'll be bloodshed before it's over. Pinder won't quit. He hated Rud Maclaren and now he hates you. He won't back up or quit." Canaval turned to Olga. "Let me talk to Sabre alone, will you? There's something he should know."

"All right." She gave me her hand. "Be careful. And goodnight."

We watched her walk back up the path, and when my eyes turned back to him, his were surprisingly soft. I could see his expression even in the moonlight. "Reminds me of her mother," he said quietly.

"You knew her?" I was surprised.

"She was my sister."

That was something I could never have guessed. "She doesn't know," he explained. "Rud and I used to ride together. I was too fast with a gun and killed a man with too many relatives. I left and Rud married my sister. From time to time we wrote, and when Rud was having trouble with rustlers, I came out to lend a hand. He persuaded me to stay."

He looked around at me. "One thing more. What did you mean about the Slades?"

SO I told him in detail of my trip to Silver Reef, the killing of Lyell and the conversation I'd overheard between Park and Booker. Where I had heard the conversation I did not tell him, and only said there was some deal between the two of them that depended upon results to be obtained by Morgan Park.

It was after midnight when I finally left the Bar M, turning off the main trail and cutting across country for the head of Gypsum Canyon.

Mulvaney was waiting for me. "Knowed the horse's walk," he explained. Nodding toward the hills, he added, "Too quiet out there."

The night was clear, wide and peaceful. Later, during the night, I awakened with a start, the sound of a shot ringing in my ears. Mulvaney was sleeping soundly, so I did not disturb him. Afterward all was quiet so I dropped off to sleep once more.

In the morning I mentioned it to Mulvaney.

"Did you get up?" he asked.

"Yeah. Went out in the yard and listened, but heard nothing more. Could have been a hunter. Maybe one of the Benaras boys."

Two hours later I knew better. Riding past Maverick Spring I saw the riderless horse grazing near a dark bundle that lay on the grass. The dark bundle was Rud Maclaren, and he was dead.

He had been shot twice from behind, both shots through the head.

He was sprawled on his face, both hands above his head, one knee drawn up. Both guns were in their holsters, and his belt gun was tied down. After one look I stood back and fired three shots as a signal to Mulvaney.

When he saw Maclaren, his face went white and he looked up. "You shouldn't have done it, boy. The country hated him but they respected him, too. They'll hang a man for this!"

"Don't be foolish!" I was irritated but appalled too. "I didn't do this! Feel of him! It must have been that shot I heard last night."

"He's cold, all right. This'll blow the lid off, Matt. You'd best rig a story for them. And it had better be good!"

"No rigging. I'll tell the truth."

"They'll hang you, Matt. They'll never believe you didn't do it." He waved a hand around. "He's on your place. The two of you have been feudin'. They'll say you shot him in the back."

Standing over the body with the words of Mulvaney in my ears, I could see with piercing clarity the situation I was in. What could he have been doing here? Why would he come to my ranch in the middle of the night?

I could see their accusing eyes when the death was reported, the shock to Olga, the reaction of the people, the accusations of Park. Somebody wanted Maclaren dead enough to shoot him in the back. Who?

VIII

STRANGELY, the morning was cool with a hint of rain. Mulvaney, at my request, had gone to the Bar M to tell Canaval of the killing, and it was up to Canaval to tell Olga. I did not like to think of that. My luck held in one sense, for Jolly Benaras came riding up the Wash, and I asked him to ride to Hattan's to report to Key Chapin.

Covering the body with a tarp, I mounted and began to scout the area. How much time I had, I did not know, but it could not be much. Soon they would be arriving from Hattan's, and even sooner from the Bar M. One thing puzzled me. There had been but one shot fired, but there were two bullet holes in Maclaren's skull.

Carefully, I examined the sand under the body and was struck by a curious thing. There was no blood! None on the sand, that is. There was plenty of blood on Rud himself, but all of it, strangely enough, seemed to come from one bullet hole!

There was a confusion of tracks where his horse had moved about while he lay there on the ground, but at this point the Wash was sandy, and no definite track could be distinguished. Then horses hoofs sounded, and I looked up to see five riders coming toward me. The nearest was Canaval, and beside him, Olga. The others were all Bar M riders, and from one glance at their faces I knew there was no doubt in their minds and little reason for speculation that I had killed Rud Maclaren.

Canaval drew up, and his eyes pierced mine, cold, calculating and shrewd. Olga threw herself from her horse and ran to the still form on the ground. She had refused to meet my eyes or to notice me.

"This looks bad, Canaval. When did he leave the ranch?"

He studied me carefully, as if he were seeing me for the first time. "I don't know, exactly," he said. "No one heard him go. He must have pulled out sometime after two this morning."

"The shot I heard was close to four."

"One shot?"

"Only one—but he's been shot twice." Hesitating a little, I asked, "Who was with him when you last saw him?"

"He was alone. If it's Morgan Park you are thinkin' of, forget it. He left right after you did. When I last saw Rud he was goin' to his room, feelin' mighty sleepy."

The Bar M riders were circling around. Their faces were cold and they started an icy chill coming up my spine. These men were utterly loyal, utterly ruthless when aroused. The night before they had given me the benefit of the doubt but now they saw no reason to think of any other solution but the obvious one.

TOM FOX, a lean, hard-bitten Bar M man, was staring at me. Coolly, he took a rope from his pommel. "What we waitin' for, men?" he asked bitterly. "There's our man."

Turning, I said, "Fox, from what I hear you're a good man and a good hand. Don't jump to any hasty conclusions. I didn't kill Rud Maclaren and had no reason to. We made peace talk last night an' parted in good spirits."

Fox looked up at Canaval. "That right?"

Canaval hesitated, his expression unchanging. Then he spoke clearly. "It is—but Rud Maclaren changed his mind afterward!"

"Changed his mind?" That I couldn't believe, yet at the expression in Canaval's eyes, I knew he was speaking the truth. "Even so," I added, "how could I be expected to know that? When I left all was friendly."

"You couldn't know it," Canaval agreed, "unless he got out of bed an' came to tell you. He might have done that, and I can think of no other reason for him to come here. He came to tell you—an' you killed him when he started away."

The hands growled and Fox shook out a loop. It was Olga who stopped them. "No! Wait until the others arrive. If he killed my father I want him to die! But wait until the others come!"

Reluctantly, Fox drew in his rope and coiled it. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I could fight, and I would if it came to that, but these men only believed they were doing the right thing. They had no idea that I was innocent. My mouth was dry and my hands felt cold. I tried to catch Olga's eye but she ignored me. Canaval seemed studying about something, but he did not speak a word.

The first one to arrive was Key Chapin, and behind him a dozen other men. He looked at me, a quick, worried glance, and then looked at Canaval. Without waiting for questions, the foreman quietly repeated what had happened, telling of the entire evening, facts that could not until then have been known to the men.

"There's one thing," I said suddenly, "that I want to call to your attention."

They looked at me, but there was not a friendly eye in the lot of them. Looking around the circle of their faces I felt a cold sinking in my stomach, and a feeling came over me. Matt Sabre, I was telling myself, this is the end. You've come to it at last, and you'll hang for another man's crime.

NOT one friendly face—and Mulvaney had not returned with the Bar M riders. There was no sign of Jolly Benaras.

"Chapin," I asked, "will you turn Maclaren over?"

The request puzzled them, and they looked from me to the covered body, then to Chapin. He swung down and walked across to the dead man. I heard Olga's breath catch, and then Chapin rolled Maclaren on his back.

He straightened up then, still puzzled. The others looked blankly at me.

"The reason you are so quick to accuse me is that he is here, on my ranch. Well, he was not killed here. *There's no blood on the ground!*"

Startled, they all looked. Before any comment could be made, I continued, "One of the wounds bled badly, and the front of his shirt is dark with blood. The sand would be too, if he'd been killed here. What I am saying is that he was killed elsewhere, then carried here!"

"But why?" Chapin protested.

Canaval said, "You mean to throw guilt onto you?"

"I sure do mean that! Also, that shot I heard fired was shot into him after he was dead!"

Fox shook his head, and sneered, "How could you figure that?"

"A dead man does not bleed. Look at him! All the blood came from one wound!"

Suddenly we heard more horsemen, and Mulvaney returned with his guns and the Benaras boys. Not one, but all of them.

Coolly, they moved up to the edge of the circle.

"We'd be beholden," the elder Benaras said loudly, "if you'd all move back. We're friends to Sabre, an' we don't believe he done it. Now give him air an' listen."

They hesitated, not liking it. But their common sense told them that if trouble started now it would be a bloody mess. Carefully, the nearest riders eased back. Whether Olga was listening, I had no idea. Yet it was she whom I wanted most to convince.

"There are other men with axes to grind beside the Pinders and I," I said. "What had I to fear from Rud? Already I had shown I could take care of myself against all of them. Face to face, I was twice the man Rud was."

"You talk yourself up mighty well," Fox said.

"You had your chance in the canyon," I said brutally, "and when I say I can hold this ranch, you know I'm not lying."

Horses came up the trail and the first faces I recognized were Bodie Miller and the redhead I'd whipped at the Two Bar. Bodie pushed his horse into the circle when he saw me. The devil was riding Bodie again, and I could see from Canaval's face that he knew it.

Right at the moment Bodie was remembering how I had dared him to gamble at pointblank range. "You, is it?" he said. "I'll kill you one day."

"Keep out of this, Bodie!" Canaval ordered sharply.

MILLER'S dislike was naked in his eyes. "Rud's dead now," he said. "Mebby you won't be the boss any more. Mebby she'll want a *younger* man for boss!"

The import of his words was like a blow across the face. Suddenly I wanted to kill him, suddenly I was going to. Canaval's voice was a cool breath of air through my fevered brain. "That will be for Miss Olga to decide." He turned to her. "Do you wish me to continue as foreman?"

"Naturally!" Her voice was cold and even, and in that moment I was proud of her. "And your first job will be to fire Bodie Miller!"

Miller's face went white with fury, and his lips bared back from his teeth. Before he could speak, I interfered. "Don't say it, Bodie! Don't say it!" I stepped forward to face him across Maclaren's body.

The malignancy of his expression was unbelievable. "You an' me are goin' to meet," he said, staring at me.

"When you're ready, Bodie." Deliberately, not wanting the fight here, now, I turned my back on him.

Chapin and Canaval joined me while the men loaded the body into a buckboard. "We don't think you're guilty, Sabre. Have you any ideas?"

"Only that I believe he was killed elsewhere and carried here to cast blame on me. I don't believe it was Pinder. He would never shoot Maclaren in the back."

"You think Park did it?" Canaval demanded.

"Peace between myself and Maclaren would be the last thing he'd want," I said.

Bob Benaras was waiting for me. "You can use Jonathan an' Jolly," he said. "I ain't got work enough to keep 'em out of mischief."

He was not fooling me in the least. "Thanks. I can use them to spell Mulvaney on lookout, and there's plenty of work to do."

FOR two weeks we worked hard, and the inquest of Rud Maclaren turned up nothing new. There had been no will, so the ranch went to Olga. Yet nothing was settled. Some people be-

lieved I had killed Maclaren, most of them did not know, but the country was quiet.

Of Bodie Miller we heard much. He killed a man at Hattan's in a saloon quarrel, shot him before he could get his hand on a gun. Bodie and Red were riding with a lot of riff-raff from Hite. The Bar M was missing cattle and Bodie laughed when he heard it. He pistol-whipped a man in Silver Reef, and wounded a man while driving off the posse that came after him.

I worried more about Morgan Park. I had to discover just what his plan was. My only chance was to follow Park every hour of the day and night. I must know where he went, what he was doing, with whom he was talking. One night I waited on a hill above Hattan's watching the house where he lived when in town.

When he came out of the house I could feel the hackles rising on the back of my neck. There was something about him that would always stir me to fury, and it did now. Stifling it, I watched him go to Mother O'Hara's, watched him mount up and ride out of town on the Bar M road. Yet scarcely a dozen miles from town he drew up and scanned his back trail. Safely under cover, I watched him. Apparently satisfied with what he did not see, he turned right along the ridge, keeping under cover. He now took a course that led him into the wildest and most remote corner of the Bar M, that neck of land north of my own and extending far west. His trail led him out upon Dark Canyon Plateau. Knowing little of this area, I closed the distance between us until I saw him making camp.

BEFORE daylight he was moving again. The sun rose and the day became hot, with a film of heat haze obscuring all the horizons. He seemed headed toward the northwest where the long line of the Sweet Alice Hills ended the visible world. This country was a maze of canyons. To the south it fell away in an almost sheer precipice for hundreds of feet to the bottom of Dark Canyon. There were trails off the plateau, but I knew none of them.

The view was breathtaking, overlooking miles of columned and whorled sandstone, towering escarpments, minarets and up-ended ledges. This had once been inhabited country for there were ruins of cliff dwellings about, and Indian writings.

The trail divided at the east end of the plateau and the flat rock gave no indication of which Park had taken. It looked as though I had lost him. Taking a chance, I went down a steep slide into Poison Canyon and worked back in the direction he must have taken, but the only tracks were of rodents and one of a bighorn sheep. Hearing a sound of singing, I dismounted. Rifle in hand, I worked my way through the rocks and brush.

"No use to shave," the man at the fire said. "We're stuck here. No chance to get to Hattan's now."

"Yeah?" The shaver scoffed. "You see that big feller? Him an' Slade are talking medicine. We'll move out soon. I don't want to get caught with no beard when I go to town."

"Who'll care how you look? An' maybe the fewer who know how you look, the better."

"After this show busts open," the shaver replied, "it ain't goin' to matter who knows me! We'll have that town sewed up tighter'n a drum!"

"Mebby." The cook straightened and rubbed his back. "Again, mebby not. I wish it was rustlin' cows. Takin' towns can be mighty mean."

"It ain't the town, just a couple o' ranches. Only three, four men on the Two Bar, an' about the same on the Bar M. Slade will have the toughest job done afore we start."

"That big feller looks man enough to do it by himself. But if he can pay, his money will look good to me."

"He better watch his step. That Sabre ain't no chicken with a pair o' Colts. He

downed Rollie Pinder, an' I figure it was him done for Lyell over to the Reef."

"It'll be somethin' when he an' Bodie git together. Both faster'n greased lightnin'."

"Sabre won't be around. Pinder figures on raidin' that spread today. Sam wouldn't help him because he'd promised Park. Pinder'll hit 'em about sundown, an' that'll be the end of Sabre."

WAITING no longer, I hurried back to my horse. If Pinder was to attack the Two Bar, Park would have to wait. Glancing at the sun, fear rose in my throat. It would be nip and tuck if I was to get back. Another idea came to me. I would rely on Mulvaney and the Benaras boys to protect the Two Bar. I would counterattack and hit the CP!

When I reached the CP it lay deserted and still but for the cook, bald-headed and big bellied. He rushed from the door but I was on him too fast, and he dropped his rifle under the threat of my sixgun. Tying him up, I dropped him in a feed bin and went to the house. Finding a can of wagon grease, I smeared it thickly over the floor in front of both doors and more of it on the steps. Leaving the door partly open, I dumped red pepper into a pan and balanced it above the door where the slightest push would send it cascading over whoever entered, filling the air with fine grains.

Opening the corral, I turned the horses loose and started them down the valley. Digging out all the coffee on the place, I packed it to take away, knowing how a cowhand dearly loves his coffee. It was my idea to make their lives as miserable as possible to get them thoroughly fed up with the fight. Pinder would not abandon the fight, but his hands might get sick of the discomfort.

Gathering a few sticks, I added them to the fire already laid, but under them I put a half-dozen shotgun shells. In the tool shed were six sticks of powder and some fuse left from blasting rocks. Digging out a crack at one corner of the fireplace I put two sticks of dynamite into the crack, then ran the fuse within two inches of the fire and covered it with ashes. The shotgun shells would explode and scatter the fire, igniting, I hoped, the fuse.

A slow hour passed after I returned to a hideout in the brush. What was happening at the Two Bar? In any kind of fight one has to have confidence in those fighting with him, and I had it in the men I'd left behind me. If one of them was killed I vowed never to stop until all this crowd were finished.

Sweat trickled down my face. It was hot under the brush. Once a rattler crawled by within six or seven feet of me. A packrat stared at me, then moved on. Crows quarreled in the trees over my head. And then I saw the riders.

One look told me. Whatever had happened at the Two Bar, I knew these men were not victorious. There were nine in the group, and two were bandaged. One had his arm in a sling, one had his skull bound up. Another man was tied over a saddle, head and heels hanging. They rode down the hill and I lifted my rifle, waiting for them to get closer to the ranch. Then I fired three times as rapidly as I could squeeze off the shots.

ONE horse sprang into the air, spun halfway around, scattering the group, then fell, sending his rider sprawling. The others rushed for the shelter of the buildings, but just as they reached them one man toppled from his horse, hit the dirt like a sack of old clothes and rolled over in the dust. He staggered to his feet and rushed toward the barn, fell again, then got up and ran on.

Others made a break for the house, and the first one to hit those greasy steps was Jim Pinder. He hit them running, his feet flew out from under him and he hit the step on his chin!

With a yell, the others charged by him, and even at that distance I could hear the crash of their falling, their

angry shouts, and then the roaring sneezes and gasping yells as the red pepper filled the air and bit into their nostrils.

Coolly, I proceeded to shoot out the windows, to knock the hinges off the door, and when Jim Pinder staggered to his feet and reached for his hat, I put a bullet through the hat. He jumped as if stung and grabbed for his pistol. He swung it up, and I fired again as he did. What happened to his shot I never knew, but he dropped the pistol with a yell and plunged for the door.

One man had ducked for the heavily planked water trough and now he fired at me. Invisible from my position, I knew that he was somewhere under the trough, and so I drilled the trough with two quick shots, draining the water down upon him. He jumped to escape, and I put a bullet into the dust to left and right of his position. Like it or not, he had to lie there while all the water ran over him. A few scattered shots stampeded their horses, and then I settled down to wait for time to bring the real fireworks.

A few shots came my way after a while, but all were high or low and none came close to me.

Taking my time, I loaded up for the second time and then rolled a smoke. My buckskin was in a low place and had cover from the shots. There was no way they could escape from the house to approach me. One wounded man had fallen near the barn, and I let him get up and limp toward it. Every once in a while somebody would fall inside the house and in the clear air I could hear the sound and each time I couldn't help but grin.

There was smashing and banging inside the house, and I could imagine what was happening. They were looking for coffee and not finding it. A few minutes later a slow trickle of smoke came out the chimney. My head resting on the palm of one hand, I took a deep drag on my cigarette and waited happily for the explosions.

THEY came, and suddenly. There was the sharp bark of a shotgun shell exploding, then a series of banging as the others went off. Two men rushed from the door and charged for the barn. Bullets into the dust hurried them to shelter, and I laid back and laughed heartily. I'd never felt so good in my life, picturing the faces of those tired, disgruntled men, besieged in the cabin, unable to make coffee, sliding on the greasy floor, sneezing from the red pepper, ducking shotgun shells from the fire.

Not five minutes had passed when the powder went off with terrific concussion. I had planted it better than I knew, for it not only cracked the fireplace but blew a hole in it from which smoke gulped, then trickled slowly.

Rising, I drifted back to my horse and headed for the ranch. Without doubt the CP outfit was beginning to learn what war meant, and furthermore, I knew my methods were far more exasperating to the cowhands than out and out fight. Your true cowhand savors a good scrap, but he does not like discomfort or annoyance, and I knew that going without water, without good food and without coffee would do more to end the fight than anything else. All the same, as I headed the gelding back toward the Two Bar, I knew that if any of my own boys had been killed I would retaliate in kind. There could be no other answer.

Mulvaney greeted me at the door. "Sure, Matt, you missed a good scrap! We give them lads the fight of their lives!"

Jolly and Jonathan looked up at me, Jolly grinning, the more serious Jonathan smiling faintly. Jolly showed me a bullet burn on his arm, the only scratch any of them had suffered.

They had been watching, taking turn about, determined they would not be caught asleep while I was gone. The result was that they sighted the CP riders when they were still miles from the headquarters of the Two Bar. The Benaras boys began it with a skir-

mishers' battle, firing from rocks and brush in a continual running fight. A half-dozen times they drove the CP riders to shelter, killing two horses and wounding a man.

They had retreated steadily until in a position to be covered by Mulvaney, who was ready with all the spare arms loaded. From the bunkhouse they stood off the attack. They had so many loaded weapons that there was no break in their fire until the CP retreated.

"Somebody didn't want to fight," Jolly explained. "We seen 'em argufyin' an' then finally somebody else joined in an' they backed out on Pinder. He was almighty sore, believe you me."

Amid much laughter I told them about my own attack on the CP.

Mulvaney ended it suddenly. "Hey!" he turned swiftly. "I forgot to tell yer. That catamount of a Bodie Miller done shot Canaval!"

"Is he dead?"

"Not the last we heard, but he's hurt mighty bad. He took four bullets before he went down."

"Miller?"

"Never got a scratch! That kid's plumb poison, I tell you! Poison!"

IX

FOR a minute I considered that, and liked none of it. Canaval had been a man with whom I could reason. More than that, with Canaval at hand there had always been protection for Olga.

There was no time to be wasted now. Telling Mulvaney of what I had seen in the canyon, I turned my buckskin toward the Bar M. I wanted first of all to talk with Olga, and second to see Canaval. If the man was alive, I had to talk to him. The gun star of Bodie Miller was rising now, and I knew how he would react. This new shooting would only serve to convince him of his speed. The confidence he had lacked on our first meeting he would now have.

He would not wait long to kill again, and he would seek out some known gunfighter, for his reputation could only grow now by killing the good ones, and Canaval had been one of the fastest around. And who would that mean? Jim Pinder, Morgan Park, or myself. And knowing how he felt about me, I had an idea whom he would be seeking out.

Key Chapin was standing on the wide veranda of the Bar M house when I rode into the yard. Fox was loitering nearby and he started toward me. "You ain't wanted here, Sabre!" he told me brusquely. "Get off the place!"

"Don't be a fool, man! I've come on business!"

He shook his head stubbornly. "Don't make no diff'rence! Start movin' an' don't reach for a gun! You're covered from the bunkhouse an' the barn!"

"Fox," I persisted, "I've no row with you, and you're the last man in the world I'd like to kill, but I don't like being pushed and you're pushin' me! I've got Bodie Miller an' Morgan Park to take care of, as well as Jim Pinder! So get this straight. If you want to die, grab iron. Don't ride me, Fox, because I won't take it!"

My buckskin started, and Fox, his face a study in conflicting emotion, hesitated. Then a cool voice interposed. "Fox! Step back! Let the gentleman come up!"

It was Olga Maclaren.

FOX hesitated, then stepped back, and I drew up the buckskin for a minute. Fox looked up at me, and our eyes met. "I'm glad of that, Fox," I said. "I'd hate to have killed a man as good as you. They don't come often."

The sincerity in my voice must have reached him, for when I happened to glance back he was staring after me, his face puzzled. As I dismounted, Chapin walked over toward the house.

Olga stood on the steps awaiting me. There was no welcome in her eyes. Her face was cool, composed. "There was something you wanted?"

"Is that my only welcome?"

"What reason have you to expect anything more?"

That made me shrug. "None," I said, "none at all. How's Canaval?"

"Resting."

"Is he better? Is he conscious?"

"Yes to both questions. Can he see anybody? No."

Then I heard him speak. "Sabre? Is that you? Come in!"

Olga hesitated, and for a minute I believed she was going to defy the request, then with a shrug of indifference she led Chapin and me into the wounded man's room.

The foreman's appearance shocked me. He was drawn and thin, his eyes huge and hollow in the deathly pallor of his face. His hand gripped mine and he stared up at me. "Glad you're here, Sabre," he said abruptly. "Watch that little demon! Oh, he's a fast man! He's blinding! He had a bullet into me before my gun cleared! He's a freak, Sabre!"

"Sure," I agreed, "but that isn't what I came about. I came to tell you again. I had nothing to do with killing Rud Maclaren."

He nodded slightly. "I'm sure of it." I could feel Olga behind me. "I found—tracks. Not yours. Horse tracks, and tracks of a man carrying a heavy burden. Small feet."

Chapin interrupted suddenly. "Sabre, I've a message for you. Picked it up in Silver Reef yesterday." He handed me a telegram, still sealed. Ripping it open, I saw there what I had expected.

MY BROTHER UNHEARD OF IN MANY MONTHS. MORGAN PARK ANSWERS DESCRIPTION OF PARK CANTWELL, WANTED FOR MURDER AND EMBEZZLEMENT OF REGIMENTAL FUNDS. COMING WEST.

LEO D'ARCY
COL. 12TH CAVALRY

Without comment I handed the message back to Chapin, who read it aloud. Olga grew pale, but she said nothing.

"Know anything about the case?" Canaval asked Chapin.

THE editor nodded. "Yes, I do. It was quite an exciting case at the time. Park Cantwell was a captain in the cavalry. He embezzled some twenty thousand dollars, then murdered his commanding officer when faced with it. He got away, was recaptured, and then broke jail and killed two men in the process. He was last heard of in Mexico."

"Not much chance of a mistake, is there?"

"None, I'd say. Or very slight. Not many men are so big, and he is a striking character. Out West here he probably believed he would not be seen. Most of his time he spent on that lonely ranch of his, and he rarely was around town until lately. Apparently, if this is true, he hoped to realize enough money out of this deal of his with Jake Booker to retire in Mexico or elsewhere. Probably in this remote corner of the West, he believed he might never be recognized."

"And now?" Olga had returned to the room. "What will happen?"

Chapin shrugged. "I'll take this message to Sheriff Will Tharp, and then we'll wait for D'Arcy to arrive."

"There's not much else we can do," I agreed.

"What is it Park and Booker want?" Chapin wondered. "I don't grasp their motive."

"Who does?" I shrugged.

Olga had not looked at me. Several times I tried to catch her eyes, but she avoided my glance. Her face was quiet, composed, and she was as always, perfectly poised. Not by so much as a flicker of an eyelash did she betray her feelings toward me, but I found no comfort in that. Whether or not she believed I had killed her father, she obviously wanted no part of me.

Discouraged, I turned toward the door.

"Where to now?" Canaval asked.

"Why—" I turned—"I'm heading for town to see Morgan Park. No man ever beat me with his fists yet and walked away scot free. I'll have the hide off that brute, and now is as good a time as any."

"Leave him alone, Sabre!" Canaval tried to sit up. "I've seen him kill a man with his fists!"

"He won't kill me."

"What is this?" Olga turned around, her eyes blazing. "A cheap, childish desire for revenge? Or are you talking just to make noise? It seems all I've heard you do since you came here is to talk! You've no right to go in there and start trouble! You've no right to fight Morgan Park simply because he beat you! Leave him alone!"

"Protecting him?" My voice was not pleasant. Did she, I wondered, actually love the man? The idea did not appeal to me, and the more it stayed in my mind the more angry I became.

"No!" she flared. "I am not protecting him! From what I saw of you after that first fight I don't believe it is he who needs the protection!"

SHE could have said nothing more likely to bring all my own temper to the surface. So when she spoke, I listened, my face stiffening. Then without another word I turned and walked from the room. I went down the steps to my horse, and into the saddle.

The buckskin leaned into the wind and kept the fast pace I set for him. Despite my fury, I kept my eyes open and on the hills. Right then I would have welcomed a fight and any kind of a fight. I was mad all the way through, burning with it.

And perhaps it was lucky that right then I should round a bend of the trail and come into the midst of Jack Slade and his men.

They had not heard me until I rounded the bend, and they were heading the same way I was, toward town. The sudden sound of horse's hoofs turned their heads, and Slade dove for his gun.

He was too late. Mad clear through, the instant I saw them I slammed the spurs into my startled buckskin. The horse gave a lunge, driving between the last two riders and striking Slade's horse with his shoulder. At the same instant, I lashed out with the barrel of my Colt and laid it above the ear of the nearest rider. He went off his horse as if struck by lightning, and I swung around, blasting a shot from my belt that knocked the gun from the hand of another rider. Slade was fighting his maddened horse, and I leaned over and hit it a crack with my hat. The horse gave a tremendous leap and started to run like a scared rabbit with Slade fighting to stay in the saddle. He had lost one stirrup when my horse lunged into his and had not recovered it. The last I saw of him was his running horse and a cloud of dust. It all happened in a split second, and one man had a smashed hand, one was knocked out, and Slade was fighting his horse.

THE fourth man had been maneuvering for a shot at me, but among the plunging horses he was afraid of hitting his own friends. Wheeling my horse, I fired as he did and both of us missed. He tried to steady his horse and swung. Buck did not like it and was fighting to get away. I let him go, taking a backward shot at the man in the saddle, a shot that must have clipped his ear for he ducked like a bee-stung farmer, and then Buck was laying them down on the trail to town.

Feeding shells into my gun, I let him run. I felt better for the action and was ready for anything. The town loomed up, and I rode in and swung down in front of Mother O'Hara's. Buck's side looked bad, for the spurs had bit deep, and I'm a man who rarely touches a spur to a horse. After greasing the wounds and talking Buck into friendship again, I went inside.

There was nobody around, but Katie O'Hara came out of her kitchen. One look at me and she could see I was

spoiling for trouble. "Morgan Park in town?"

She did not hesitate. "He is that. A moment ago I heard he was in the saloon."

Morgan Park was there, all right. He was sitting at a table with Jake Booker, and they both looked up when I entered. I didn't waste any time. I walked up to them.

"Booker," I said, "I've heard you're a no-account shyster, a sheep-stealin', small-town shyster, at that. But you're doing business with a thief and a murderer, and the man I'm going to whip!" With that I grabbed the table and hurled it out of the way, and then I slapped Morgan Park across the mouth with my hat.

Morgan Park came off his chair with a roar. He lunged and came up fast, and I smashed him in the teeth with a left. His lips flattened and blood showered from his mouth, and then I threw a right that caught him flush on the chin —and I threw it hard!

He blinked, but he never stopped coming, and he rushed me, swinging with both of those huge, ironlike fists. One of them rang bells on my skull and the other dug for my mid-section with a blow I partially blocked with an elbow, then I turned with his arm over my shoulder, and I threw him bodily across the floor against the bar rail. He came up fast, and I nailed him with another left. Then he caught me with both hands, and sparks danced among the stars in my skull. That old smoky taste came up inside of me, and the taste of blood in my mouth and I walked in smashing with both hands! Something busted on his face, and his brow was cut to the bone and the blood was running all over him.

THERE was a crowd around, and they were yelling but I heard no sound. I walked in, bobbing and weaving to miss as many of those jarring, brutal blows as possible, but they kept landing and battering me. He knocked me back into the bar and then grabbed a bottle. He took a terrific cut at my skull and I ducked, smashing him in the ribs. He staggered and sprawled out of balance from the force of his missed swing, and I rushed him and took a flying leap at his shoulders. I landed astride and jammed both spurs into his thighs and he let out a roar of agony.

I went over his head, lighting on all fours, and he sprang atop my back. I flattened out on the floor with the feeling that he had me. He was yelling like a madman, and he grabbed my hair and began to beat my head against the floor. How I did it I'll never know, but I bowed my back under his weight and forced myself to my hands and knees. He ripped at me with his own spurs, and then I got his leg and threw him off.

Coming up together we circled, more wary now. His shirt was in ribbons, and he was covered with blood. I'd never seen Morgan stripped before. He had a chest and shoulders like a Hercules. He circled and then came into me, snarling. I nailed that snarl into his teeth with both fists, and we stood there swinging them free with both hands, rocking with the power of those punches and smelling of sweat, blood, and fury.

He backed up and I went into him. Suddenly he caught my upper arms and dropping put a foot in my stomach and threw me over his head!

For a fleeting instant I was flying through the air and then I lit on a poker table and grabbed the sides with both hands. It went over on top of me, and that was all that saved me as he rushed in to finish me with the boots. I shoved the table at him and came up off the floor, and he hit me again and I went right back down. He dropped a big palm on my head and shoved me at the floor. I sprawled out and he kicked me in the side. It missed my ribs and glanced off my gun belt, and I rolled over and grabbed his boot, twisting hard!

It threw him off-balance and he hit the floor, which gave me a chance to get on my feet. I got him just as he was

halfway up with a right that knocked him through the door and out onto the porch. I hit the porch in a jump, and he tacked me around the knees. We both were down then, and I slapped him with a cupped hand over his ear and knew from the way he let go that I'd busted an eardrum for him. I dropped him again with a solid right to the chin, and stood back, gasping and pain-wracked, fighting for breath. He got up more slowly, and I nailed him left and right in the mouth and he went down heavily.

SPRAWLED out, he lay there on the edge of the walk, one hand trailing in the dust, and I stared down at him. He was finished, through! Turning on my heels I walked back inside and brushing off those who crowded around me I headed for the bar. I took the glass of whiskey that was shoved at me and poured it in my hands and mopped the cuts on the lower part of my face with it. Then I took a quick gulp from the glass which they put before me and turned.

Morgan Park was standing three feet away from me, a bloody, battered giant with cold, ugly fury blazing from his eyes. "Give me a drink!" he bellowed.

He picked up the glass and tossed it off. "Another!" he yelled, while I stared at him. He picked that up, lifted it to his lips, then threw it in my eyes!

I must have blinked, for instead of getting the shot glass full, I got only part of it, but enough to blind me. And then he stepped close. As I fought for sight I caught a glimpse of his boot toes, wide spread, and I was amazed that such a big man had such small feet. Then he hit me. It felt like a blow from an axe, and it knocked me into the bar. He faced around, taking his time, and he smashed one into my body and I went down, gasping for breath. He kicked at me with the toe of one of those deadly boots that could have put an eye out, but the kick glanced off the side of my head and I went down.

It was my turn to be down and out. Then somebody drenched me with a bucket of water and I looked up. Key Chapin was standing over me, but it was not Key Chapin who had thrown the water. It was Olga.

Right then I was only amazed that she was there at all, and then I got up shakily and somebody said, "There he is!" and I saw Park standing there with his hands on his hips, leering at me, and with the same mutual hatred we went for each other again.

How we did it I don't know. Both of us had taken beatings that would have killed a horse. All I knew was that time for me had stopped. Only one thing remained. I had to whip that man, whip him or kill him with my bare hands and I was not stopping until I was sure I had done it.

"Stop it, you crazy fools! Stop it or I'll throw you both in jail!" Sheriff Will Tharp was standing in the door with a gun on me. His cold blue eyes were blazing.

Behind him were maybe twenty men staring at us. One of them was Key Chapin. Another was Bodie Miller.

"Take him out of here, then," I said. "If he wants more of this he can have it in the morning."

Park backed toward the door, then turned away. He looked punch drunk.

After that I sat up for an hour putting hot water on my face.

Then I went to the livery stable and crawled into the loft, taking a blanket with me. I had worn my guns and had my rifle along.

How long I slept I have no idea except that when I awakened bright sunlight was streaming through the cracks in the walls of the old stable, and the loft was like an oven with the heat. Sitting up, I touched my face. It was sore, all right, but felt better. I worked my fingers to loosen them up, and then heard a movement and looked around. Morgan Park was on the ladder staring at me. And I knew then that I was not looking at a sane man.

X

HE STOOD there on the ladder in that hot old barn, staring at me with hatred and a fury that seemed no whit abated from the previous night.

"You back again?" I spoke quietly, yet lay poised for instant movement. I knew now the tremendous vitality that huge body held. "After the way I licked you last night?"

The veins distended in his brow and throat. "Whipped *me?*" His voice was hoarse with anger. "Why, you—" He started over the end of the ladder, and I let him come. Right then I could have cooled him, knocked him off that ladder, but something within me wouldn't allow it. With a lesser man, one I could have whipped easily, I might have done it just to end the fighting, but not with Morgan Park. Right then I knew I had to whip him fairly, or I could never be quite comfortable again.

He straightened from the ladder, and I could see that he was a little stiff. Well, so was I. But my boxing with Mulvaney and the riding I had done had been keeping me in trim. My condition was better than his, almost enough to equalize his greater size and strength. He straightened and turned toward me. He did not rush, just stood there studying me with cool calculation, and I knew that he, too, had come here to make an end to this fight and to me.

Right then he was studying how best to whip me and suddenly, I perceived his advantage. In the loft, one side open to the barn, the rest of it stacked with hay, I was distinctly at a disadvantage. Here his weight and strength could be decisive. He moved toward me, backing me toward the hay. I feinted, but he did not strike. He merely moved on in, his head hunched behind a big shoulder, his fists before him, moving slightly. Then he lunged. My back came up against the slanting wall of hay and my feet slipped. Off-balance, lying against the hay, I had no power in my blows. With cold brutality he began to swing, his eyes were exultant and wicked with sadistic delight. Lights exploded in my brain, and then another punch hit me, and another.

My head spinning, my mouth tasting of smoke, I let myself slide to a sitting position, then threw my weight sidewise against his knees. He staggered, and fearing the fall off the edge of the loft, fought for balance. Instantly, I smashed him in the mouth. He went to his haunches, and I sprang past him, grabbed a rope that hung from the rafters and dropped to the hard-packed earth of the barn's floor.

He turned and glared at me, and I waited. A man appeared in the door, and I heard him yell, "They're at it again!" And then Morgan Park clambered down the ladder and turned to me.

NOW it had to be ended. Moving in quickly, I jabbed a stiff left to his face. The punch landed on his lacerated mouth and started the blood. Circling carefully, I slipped a right and countered with a right to the ribs. Then I hit him, fast and rolling my shoulders, with a left and right to the face. He came in, but I slipped another punch and uppercut hard to the wind. That slowed him down. He hit me with a glancing left and took two punches in return.

He looked sick now, and I moved in, smashing him on the chin with both hands. He backed up, bewildered, and I knocked his left aside and hit him on the chin. He went to his knees and I stepped back and let him get up.

Behind me there was a crowd and I knew it. Waiting, I let him get up. He wiped off his hands, then lunged at me, head down and swinging! Sidestepping swiftly, I evaded the rush, and when he tried it again I dropped my palm to the top of his head and spun him. At the same instant I uppercut with a wicked right that straightened him up. He turned toward me and then I pulled the trigger on a high hard one. It struck his chin with the solid thud of the butt end of an ax striking a log.

He fell—not over backwards, but face down. He lay there still and quiet, unmoving. Out cold.

Sodden with weariness and fed up with fighting for once, I turned away from him and picked up my hat and rifle. Nobody said anything, staring at my battered face and torn clothing. Then they walked to him.

At the door I met Sheriff Tharp. He glared at me. "Didn't I tell you to stop fighting in this town, Sabre?"

"What am I going to do? Let him beat my head off? I came here to sleep without interruption and he followed me, found me this morning." Jerking my head toward the barn's interior, I told him, "You'll find him in there, Tharp."

He hesitated. "Better have some rest, Sabre. Then ride out of town for a few days. After all, I have to have peace. I'm arresting Park."

"Not for fighting?"

"For murder. This morning I received an official communication confirming your message."

ACTUALLY, I was sorry for him. No man ever hates a man he has whipped in a hand to hand fight. All I wanted now was sleep, food, and gallons of cold spring water. Right then I felt as if it had been weeks since I'd had a decent drink.

Yet all the way to O'Hara's I kept remembering that bucket of water doused over me the night before. Had it really been Olga Maclaren there? Or had I been out of my head from the punches I'd taken?

When my face was washed off I came into the restaurant, and the first person I saw was Key Chapin. He looked at my face and shook his head. "I'd never believe anything human could fight the way you two did!" he exclaimed. "And again this morning! I hear you whipped him good this time."

"Yeah." I was tired of it all. Somberly, I ate breakfast, listening to the drone of voices in my ears.

"Booker's still in town." Chapin was speaking. "What's he after, I wonder?"

Right then I did not care, but as I ate and drank coffee, my mind began to function once more. After all, this was my country. I belonged here. For the first time I really felt that I belonged someplace.

"Am I crazy, or was Olga here last night?"

"She was here, all right. She saw part of your fight."

"Did she leave?"

"I think not. I believe she's staying over at Doc and Mrs. West's place. They're old friends of hers." Chapin knocked out his pipe. "As a matter of fact, you'd better go over there and have him look at those cuts. One of them at least needs some stitches."

"Tharp arrested Park."

"Yes, I know. Park is Cantwell, all right."

Out in the air I felt better. With food and some strong black coffee inside of me I felt like a new man, and the mountain air was fresh and good to the taste. Turning, I started up the street, walking slowly. This was Hattan's. This was my town. Here, in this place, I would remain, I would ranch here, graze my cattle, rear my sons to manhood. Here I would take my place in the world and be something more than the careless, cheerful, trouble-hunting rider. Here, in this place, I belonged.

DOC WEST lived in a small white cottage surrounded by rose bushes and shrouded in vines. Several tall poplars reached toward the sky and there was a small patch of lawn inside the white picket fence.

He answered the door at my rap, a tall, austere-looking man with gray hair and keen blue eyes. He smiled at me. "You're Matt Sabre? I was expecting you."

That made me grin. "With a face like this, you should expect me. I took a licking for a while."

"And gave one to Morgan Park. I

have just come from the jail where I looked him over. He has three broken ribs and his jaw is broken."

"No!" I stared at him.

He nodded. "The ribs were broken last night sometime, I'd guess."

"There was no quit in him."

West nodded seriously. "There still isn't. He's a dangerous man, Sabre. A very dangerous man."

That I knew. Looking around, I saw nothing of Olga Maclaren. Hesitating to ask, I waited and let him work on me. When he was finished I got to my feet and buckled on my guns.

"And now?" he asked.

"Back to the Two Bar. There's work to do there."

He nodded, but seemed to be hesitating about something. Then he asked, "What about the murder of Rud Maclaren? What's your view on that?"

Something occurred to me then that I had forgotten. "It was Morgan Park," I said. "Canaval found the footprint of a man nearby. The boots were very small. Morgan Park—and I noticed it for the first time during our fight—has very small feet despite his size."

"You may be right," he agreed hesitantly. "I've wondered."

"Who else could it have been? I know I didn't do it."

"I don't believe you did, but—" he hesitated, then dropped the subject.

Slowly, I walked out to the porch and stopped there, fitting my hat on my head. It had to be done gently for I had two good-sized lumps just at my hair line. A movement made me turn, and Olga was standing in the doorway.

HER dark hair was piled on her head, the first time I had seen it that way, and she was wearing something green and summery that made her eyes an even deeper green. For a long moment neither of us spoke, and then she said, "Your face—does it hurt very much?"

"Not much. It mostly just looks bad, and I'll probably not be able to shave for awhile. How's Canaval?"

"He's much better. I've put Fox to running the ranch."

"He's a good man." I twisted my hat in my hands. "When are you going back?"

"Tomorrow, I believe."

How lovely she was! At this moment I knew that I had never in all my life seen anything so lovely, or anyone so desirable, or anyone who meant so much to me. It was strange, all of it. But how did she feel toward me?

"You're staying on the Two Bar?"

"Yes, my house is coming along now, and the cattle are doing well. I've started something there, and I think I'll stay. This," I said quietly, "is my home, this is my country. This is where I belong."

She looked up, and as our eyes met I thought she was going to speak, but she said nothing. Then I stepped quickly to her and took her hands. "Olga! You can't really believe that I killed your father? You can't believe I ever would do such a thing?"

"No. I never really believed you'd killed him."

"Then—"

She said nothing, not meeting my eyes.

"I want you, Olga. You, more than anything. I want you on the Two Bar. You are the reason I have stayed here, and you are the reason I am going to remain."

"Don't. Don't talk like that. We can never be anything to each other."

"What are you saying? You can't mean that!"

"I do mean it. You—you're violent! You're a killer! You've killed men here, and I think you live for fighting! I watched you in that fight with Morgan! You—you actually enjoyed it!"

THINKING that over, I had to agree. "In a way, yes. After all, fighting has been a necessity too long in the life of men upon earth. It is not an easy thing to be rid of. Mentally, I know that violence is always a bad means to

an end. I know that all disputes should be settled without it. Nevertheless, deep inside me there is something that does like it. It is too old a feeling to die out quickly, and as long as there are men in the world like Morgan Park, the Pinders and Bodie Miller, there must be men willing and able to fight them."

"But why does it have to be you?" She looked up at me quickly. "Don't fight any more, Matt! Stay on the Two Bar for a while! Don't come to town! I don't want you to meet Bodie Miller! You mustn't! You mustn't!"

Shrugging, I drew back a little. "Honey, there are some things a man must do, some things he has to do. If meeting Bodie Miller is one of them, I'll do it. Meeting a man who challenges you may seem very foolish to a woman's world, but a man cannot live only among women. He must live with men, and that means he must be judged by their standards, and if I back down for Miller, then I'm through here."

"You can go away! You could go to California. You could go and straighten out some business for me there! Matt, you could—"

"No. I'm staying here."

There were more words and hard words, but when I left her I had not changed. Not that I underestimated Miller in any way. I had seen such men before. Billy the Kid had been like him. Bodie Miller was full of salt now. He was riding his luck with spurs. Remembering that sallow face with its hard, cruel eyes, I knew I could not live in the country around Hattan's without facing Miller.

YET I saw nothing of Bodie Miller in Hattan's, and took the trail for the Two Bar, riding with caution. The chances were he was confident enough now to face me, especially after the smashing I'd taken. Moreover, the Slades were in the country and would be smarting over the beating I had given them.

The Two Bar looked better than anything I had seen in a long time. It was shadowed now with late evening, but the slow smoke lifted straight above the chimney, and I could see the horses in the corral. As I rode into the yard a man materialized from the shadows. It was Jonathan Benaras, with his long rifle.

When I swung down from the saddle he stared at my face, but said nothing. Knowing he would be curious, I explained simply. "Morgan Park and I had it out. It was quite a fight. He took a licking."

"If he looks worse'n you he must be a sight."

"He does, believe me. Anybody been around?"

"Nary a soul. Jolly was down the Wash this afternoon. Them cows are sure fattenin' up fast. You got you a mighty fine ranch here. Paw was over. He said if you needed another hand you could have Zeb for the askin'."

"Thanks. Your father's all man."

Jonathan nodded. "I reckon. We aim to be neighbors to folks who'll neighbor with us. We won't have no truck with them as walks it high an' mighty. Paw took to you right off. Said you come an' faced him like a man an' laid your cards on the table."

Mulvaney grinned when I walked through the door, and then indicated the food on the table. "Set up. You're just in time."

It was good, sitting there in my own home, seeing the light reflecting from the dishes and feeling the warmth and pleasantness of it. But the girl I wanted to share these things with was not here to make it something more than just a house.

"You are silent tonight," Mulvaney said shrewdly. "Is it the girl, or is it the fight?"

I grinned and my face hurt with the grinning. "I was thinking of the girl, but not of Park."

"I was wondering about the fight," Mulvaney replied. "I wish I'd been there to see it."

I TOLD them about it, and as I talked I began to wonder what Park would do now, for he would not rest easy in jail, and there was no telling what trick Jake Booker might be up to. And what was it they wanted? Until I knew that, I knew nothing.

The place to look was where the Bar M and the Two Bar joined. And tomorrow I would do my looking, and would do it carefully.

On this ride Mulvaney joined me, and I welcomed the company as well as the Irishman's shrewd brain. We rode east, toward the vast wilderness that lay there, east toward the country where I had followed Morgan Park toward his rendezvous with Jack Slade. East, toward the maze of canyons, desert and lonely lands beyond the river.

"See any tracks up that way before?" Mulvaney asked suddenly.

"Some," I admitted, "but I was following the fresh trail. We'll have a look around."

"Think it will be that silver you found out about in Booker's office?"

"Could be. We'll head for Dark Canyon Plateau and work north from there. I think that's the country."

"I'd feel better," Mulvaney admitted after a pause, "if we knew what had become of that Slade outfit. They'll be feelin' none too kindly after the whippin' you gave 'em."

I agreed. Studying the narrowing point, I knew we would soon strike a trail that led back to the northwest, a trail that would take us into the depths of Fable Canyon. Nearing that trail, I suddenly saw something that looked like a horse track. A bit later we found the trail of a single horse, freshly shod and heading northeast—a trail no more than a few hours old!

"Could be one o' the Slade outfit," Mulvaney speculated dubiously. "Park's in jail, an' nobody else would come over here."

We fell in behind, and I could see these tracks must have been made during the night. At one place a hoof had slipped and the earth had not yet dried out. Obviously then, the horse had passed after the sun went down.

WE RODE with increasing care, and we were gaining. When the canyon branched we found a waterhole where the rider had filled his canteen and prepared a meal. "He's no woodsman, Mulvaney. Much of the wood he used was not good burning wood and some of it green. Also, his fire was in a place where the slightest breeze would swirl smoke in his face."

"He didn't unsaddle," Mulvaney said, "which means he was in a hurry."

This was not one of Slade's outlaws, for always on the dodge, nobody knew better than they how to live in the wilds. Furthermore, they knew these canyons. This might be a stranger drifting into the country looking for a hideout. But it was somewhere in this maze that we would find what it was that drew the interest of Morgan Park.

Scouting around, I suddenly looked up. "Mulvaney! He's whipped up! There's no trail out!"

"Sure'n he didn't take wings to get out of here," Mulvaney growled. "We've gone blind, that's what we've done."

Returning to the spring we let the horses drink while I did some serious thinking. The rock walls offered no route of escape. The trail had been plain to this point, and then vanished.

No tracks. He had watered his horse, prepared a meal—and afterward left no tracks. "It's uncanny," I said. "It looks like we've a ghost on our hands."

Mulvaney rubbed his grizzled jaw and chuckled. "Who would be better to cope with a ghost than a couple of Irishmen?"

"Make some coffee, you bog-trotter," I told him. "Maybe then we'll think better."

"It's a cinch he didn't fly," I said later, over coffee, "and not even a snake could get up these cliffs. So he rode in, and if he left, he rode out."

"But he left no tracks, Matt. He could have brushed them out, but we saw no

signs of brushing. Where does that leave us?"

"Maybe"—the idea came suddenly—"he tied something on his feet?"

"Let's look up the canyons. He'd be most careful right here, but if he is wearin' somethin' on his feet the further he goes the more tired he'll be—or his horse will be."

"You take one canyon, and I'll take the other. We'll meet back here in an hour."

Walking, leading my buckskin, I scanned the ground. At no place was the sand hard-packed, and there were tracks of deer, lion, and an occasional bighorn. Then I found a place where wild horses had fed, and there something attracted me. Those horses had been frightened!

From quiet feeding they had taken off suddenly, and no bear or lion would frighten them so. They would leave, but not so swiftly. Only one thing could make mild horses fly so quickly—man!

The tracks were comparatively fresh, and instinct told me this was the right way. The wild horses had continued to run. Where their tracks covered the bottom of the canyon, and where the unknown rider must follow them, I should find a clue. And I did, almost at once.

Something foreign to the rock and manzanita caught my eye. Picking it free of a manzanita branch, I straightened up. It was sheep's wool!

SWEARING softly, I swung into the saddle and turned back. The rider had brought sheepskins with him, tied some over his horse's hoofs and some over his own boots and so left no defined tracks. Mulvaney was waiting for me. "Find anything?"

He listened with interest and then nodded. "It was a good idea he had. Well, we'll get him now!"

The trail led northeast and finally to a high, windswept plateau unbroken by anything but a few towering rocks or low growing sagebrush. We sat our horses squinting against the distance, looking over the plateau and then out over the vast maze of canyons, a red, corrugated distance of land almost untrod by men. "If he's out there," Mulvaney said, "we may never find him. You could lose an army in that."

"We'll find him. My hunch is that it won't be far." I nodded at the distance. "He had no pack horse, only a canteen to carry water, and even if he's uncommonly shrewd, he's not experienced in the wilds."

Mulvaney had been studying the country. "I prospected through here, boy." He indicated a line of low hills to the east. "Those are the Sweet Alice Hills. There are ruins ahead of us, and away yonder is beef basin."

"We'll go slow. My guess is we're not far behind him."

As if in acknowledgement of my comment, a rifle shot rang out sharply in the clear air! We heard no bullet, but only the shot, and then another, closer, sharper!

"He's not shootin' at us!" Mulvaney said, staring with shielded eyes. "Where is he?"

"Let's move!" I called. "I don't like this spot!"

Recklessly, we plunged down the steep trail into the canyon. Down, down, down! Racing around elbow turns of the switchback trail, eager only to get off the skyline and into shelter. If the unknown rider had not fired at us, whom had he fired at?

Who was the rider? Why was he shooting?

XI

TIRED as my buckskin was, he seemed to grasp the need for getting under cover, and he rounded curves in that trail that made my hair stand on end. At the bottom we drew up in a thick cluster of trees and brush, listening. Even our horses felt the tension, for their ears were up, their eyes alert.

All was still. Some distance away a stone rattled. Sweat trickled behind my

ear, and I smelt the hot aroma of dust and baked leaves. My palms grew sweaty and I dried them, but there was no sound. Careful to let my saddle creak as little as possible, I swung down, Winchester in hand. With a motion to wait, I moved away.

From the edge of the trees I could see no more than thirty yards in one direction, and no more than twenty in the other. Rock walls towered above and the canyon lay hot and still under the midday sun. From somewhere came the sound of trickling water, but there was no other sound nor movement. My neck felt hot and sticky, my shirt clung to my shoulders. Shifting the rifle in my hands, I studied the rock walls with misgiving. Drying my hands on my jeans I took a chance and moved out of my cover, moving to a narrow, six-inch band of shade against the far wall. Easing myself to the bend of the rock, I peered around.

Sixty yards away stood a saddled horse, head hanging. My eyes searched and saw nothing, and then, just visible beyond a white, water-worn boulder, I saw a boot and part of a leg. Cautiously, I advanced, wary for any trick, ready to shoot instantly. There was no sound but an occasional chuckle of water over rocks. Then suddenly I could see the dead man.

His skull was bloody, and he had been shot over the eye with a rifle and at fairly close range. He had probably never known what hit him. There was vague familiarity to him and his skull bore a swelling. This had been one of Slade's men whom I had slugged on the trail to Hattan's.

The bullet had struck over the eye and ranged downward which meant he had been shot from ambush, from a hiding place high on the canyon wall. Lining up the position, I located a tuft of green that might be a ledge.

Mulvaney was approaching me. "He wasn't the man we followed," he advised. "This one was comin' from the other way."

"He's one of the Slade crowd. Drygulched."

"Whoever he is," Mulvaney assured me, "we can't take chances. The fellow who killed this man shot for keeps."

WE STARTED on, but no longer were the tracks disguised. The man we followed was going more slowly now. Suddenly I spotted a boot print. "Mulvaney!" I whispered hoarsely. "That's the track of the man who killed Rud Maclaren!"

"But Morgan Park is in the hoosegow!" Mulvaney protested.

"Unless he's broken out. But I'd swear that was the track found near Maclaren's body. The one Canaval found!"

My buckskin's head came up and his nostrils dilated. Grabbing his nose, I stifled the neigh, then stared up the canyon. Less than a hundred yards away a dun horse was picketed near a patch of bunchgrass. Hiding our horses in a box canyon, we scaled the wall for a look around. From the top of the badly fractured mesa we could see all the surrounding country. Under the southern edge of the mesa was a cluster of ancient ruins, beyond them some deep canyons. With my glasses shielded from sun reflection by my hat, I watched a man emerge from a crack in the earth, carrying a heavy sack. Placing it on the ground he removed his coat and with a pick and bar began working at a slab of rock.

"What's he doin'?" Mulvaney demanded, squinting his eyes.

"Pryin' a slab of rock," I told him, and even as I spoke the rock slid, rumbled with other debris, then settled in front of the crack. After a careful inspection the man concealed his tools, picked up his sack and rifle and started back. Studying him, I could see he wore black jeans, very dusty now, and a small hat. His face was not visible. He bore no resemblance to anyone I had seen before.

He disappeared near the base of the

mountain and for a long time we heard nothing.

"He's gone," I said.

"We'd best be mighty careful," Mulvaney warned uneasily. "That's no man to be foolin' with, I'm thinkin'!"

A shot shattered the clear, white radiance of the afternoon. One shot, and then another.

We stared at each other, amazed and puzzled. There was no other sound, no further shots. Then uneasily we began our descent of the mesa, sitting ducks if he was waiting for us. To the south and west the land shimmered with heat, looking like a vast and unbelievable city, long fallen to ruin. We slid into the canyon where we'd left the horses, and then the shots were explained.

Both horses were on the ground, sprawled in pools of their own blood. Our canteens had been emptied and smashed with stones. We were thirty miles from the nearest ranch, and the way lay through some of the most rugged country on earth.

"There's water in the canyons," Mulvaney said at last, "but no way to carry it. You think he knew who we were?"

"If he lives in this country he knows that buckskin of mine," I said bitterly. "He was the best horse I ever owned."

TO HAVE hunted for us and found us, the unknown man would have had to take a chance on being killed himself, but by this means he left us small hope of getting out alive.

"We'll have a look where he worked," I said. "No use leaving without knowing about that."

It took us all of an hour to get there, and night was near before we had dug enough behind the slab of rock to get at the secret. Mulvaney cut into the bank with his pick. Ripping out a chunk and grabbing it, he thrust it under my eyes, his own glowing with enthusiasm. "Silver!" he said hoarsely. "Look at it! If the vein is like that for any distance this is the biggest strike I ever saw! Richer than Silver Reef!"

The ore glittered in his hand. There was what had killed Rud Maclaren and all the others. "It's rich," I agreed, "but I'd settle for the Two Bar."

Mulvaney agreed. "But still," he said, "the silver is a handsome sight."

"Pocket it then," I said dryly, "for it's a long walk we have."

"But a walk we can do!" He grinned at me. "Shall we start now?"

"Tonight," I said, "when the walking will be cool."

We let the shadows grow long around us while we walked and watched the thick blackness choke the canyons and deepen in the shadows of trees. We walked on steadily, with little talk, up Ruin Canyon and over a saddle of the Sweet Alice Hills, and down to the spring on the far side of the hills.

There we rested, and we drank several times. From the stars I could see that it had taken us better than two hours of walking to make less than five miles. But now the trail would be easier along Dark Canyon Plateau—and then I remembered Slade's camp. What if they were back there again? Holed up in the same place?

It was a thought, and to go down the canyon toward them was actually none out of the way. Although the walking might be rougher at times, we would have the stream beside us, a thing to be considered. Mulvaney agreed and we descended into the canyon.

Dark it was there, and quiet except for the rustle of water over stones, and there was a cool dampness that was good to our throats and skins after the heat. We walked on, taking our time, for we'd no records to break. And then we heard singing before we saw the reflection of the fire.

We walked on, moving more carefully, for the canyon walls caught and magnified every sound.

Three men were about the fire and one of them was Jack Slade. Two were talking while one man sang as he cleaned his rifle. We reached the edge of the firelight before they saw us, and I had

my Winchester on them, and Mulvaney that cannonlike four-shot pistol of his. "Grab the sky, Slade!" I barked the order at him, and his hand dropped, then froze.

"Who is it?" he demanded hoarsely, straining his eyes at us. Our faces being shielded by the brims of our hats, he could not see enough of them. I stepped nearer so the firelight reached under my hat brim.

"It's Matt Sabre," I said, "and I'm not wanting to kill you or anybody. We want two horses. You can lend them to us, or we'll take them. Our horses were shot by the same man that killed your partner."

SLADE jerked, his eyes showing incredulity. "Killed? Lott killed?"

"That's right. Intentionally or otherwise he met up with the hombre we were following. He drilled your man right over the eyes. We followed on, and he found where we left our horses and shot them both to leave us afoot."

"Damn a man that'll kill a horse," Slade said. "Who was he?"

"Don't know," I admitted. "Only he leaves a track like Morgan Park. At least, he's got a small foot."

"But Park's in jail," Mulvaney added.

"Not now he isn't," Slade said. "Morgan Park broke jail within an hour after darkness last night. He pulled one of those iron bars right out of that old wall, stole a horse and got away. He's on the loose and after somebody's scalp."

Park free! But the man we had followed had not been as big as Park was. I did not tell them that. "How about the horses?" I asked.

"You can have them, Sabre," Slade said grudgingly. "I'm clearing out. I've no stomach for this sort of thing."

"Are they spares?"

Slade nodded. "We've a half-dozen extras. In our business it pays to keep fresh horses." He grinned. "No hard feelin's, Sabre?"

"Not me," I said. "Only don't you boys get any wild ideas about jumping me. My trigger finger is right jittery."

Slade shrugged wryly. "With two guns on us? Not likely. I don't know whether your partner can shoot or not, but with a cannon that big he doesn't need to. What kind of a gun is that, anyway?"

"She's my own make," Mulvaney said cheerfully, "but the slug kills just as dead."

"Give this hombre an old stove pipe and he'd make a cannon," I told them. "He's a genius with tools."

While Mulvaney got the horses I stood over the camp. "Any other news in town?" I asked Slade.

"Plenty!" he admitted. "Some Army officer came into town claimin' Park killed his brother. Seems a right salty gent. And—" his eyes flickered to mine —"Bodie Miller is talkin' it big around town. He says you're his meat."

"He's a heavy eater, that boy," I said carelessly. "He may tackle something one of these days that will give him indigestion."

JACK SLADE shrugged and watched Mulvaney lead the horses up. As we mounted, I glanced back at him. "We'll leave these horses at the corral of the livery stable in town, if you like."

Slade's eyes twinkled a little. "Better not. First time you get a chance take 'em to a corral you'll find in the woods back of Armstrong's. Towns don't set well with me, nor me with them."

The horses were fresh and ready to go, and we let them run. Daylight found us riding up the street of Hattan's, a town that was silent and waiting. The loft was full of hay and both of us headed for it. Two hours later I was wide awake. Splashing water on my face I headed for O'Hara's. The first person I saw as we came through the door was Key Chapin. Olga Maclaren was with him.

Chapin looked up as we entered. "Sorry, Sabre," he said. "I've just heard."

"Heard what?" I was puzzled.

"That you're losing the Two Bar."

"Are you crazy? What are you talking about?"

"You mean you haven't heard? Jake Booker showed up the other day and filed a deed to the Two Bar. He purchased the rights to it from Ball's nephew, the legitimate heir. He also has laid claim to the Bar M, maintaining that it was never actually owned by Rud Maclaren, but belonged to his brother-in-law, now dead. Booker has found some relative of the brother-in-law and bought his right to the property."

"Well, of all the— That's too flimsy, Chapin. He can't hope to get away with that! What's on his mind?"

Chapin shrugged. "If he goes to court he can make it tough. You have witnesses to the fact that Ball gave you the ranch, but whether that will stand in court, I don't know. Especially, with a shrewd operator like Booker fighting it. As to Maclaren, it turns out he did leave the ranch to his brother-in-law during a time some years ago when he was suffering from a gunshot wound, and apparently never made another will. What's important right now is that Jake is going to court to get both you and Olga off the ranches and he plans to freeze all sales, bank accounts and other money or stock until the case is settled."

"In other words, he doesn't want us to have the money to fight him."

CHAPIN shrugged. "I don't know what his idea is, but I'll tell you one thing. He stands in well with the judge, who is just about as crooked as he is, and they'll use your reputation against you. Don't think Booker hasn't considered all the angles, and don't think he doesn't know how flimsy his case may be. He'll bolster it every way possible, and he knows every trick in the book."

I sat down. This had come so suddenly that it took the wind out of my sails. "Has this news gone to the Bar M yet? Has it got out to Canaval?"

Chapin shrugged. "Why should it? He was only the foreman. Olga has been told, and you can imagine how she feels."

My eyes went to hers, and she looked away. Katie O'Hara came in, and I gave her my order for breakfast and tried the coffee she had brought with her. It tasted good.

Sitting there my mind began to work swiftly. There was still a chance if I figured things right. Jake Booker was no fool. He had not paid out money for those claims unless he believed he could make them stand in court. He knew about how much money I had, and knew that Olga Maclaren, with the ranch bank accounts frozen, would be broke. Neither of us could afford to hire an attorney, and so far as that went, there was no attorney within miles able to cope with Booker. What had started as a range war had degenerated into a range steal by a shyster lawyer, and he had arguments that could not be answered with a gun.

"How was Canaval when you left?"

"Better," Olga said, still refusing to meet my eyes.

"What about Morgan Park? I heard he escaped."

"Tharp's out after him now. That Colonel D'Arcy went with him and the posse. There had been a horse left for Park. Who was responsible for that, we don't know, but it may have been one of his own men."

"Where did Tharp go?"

"Toward the ranch, I think. There was no trail they could find."

"They should have gone east, toward Dark Canyon. That's where he'll be."

Chapin looked at me curiously, intently. "Why there?"

"That's where he'll go," I replied definitely. "Take my word for it."

THEY talked a little between them but I ate in silence, always conscious of the girl across the table, aware of her every move.

Finishing my meal, I got up and reached for my hat. Olga looked up quickly. "Don't go out there! Bodie Miller is in town!"

"Thanks." Our eyes met and held. Were they saying something to me? Or was I reading into their depths the meaning I wanted them to hold? "Thanks," I repeated. "I'd prefer not to meet him now. This is no time for personal grudges."

It was a horse I wanted, a better horse than the one borrowed from Slade, and which might have been stolen. This, I reflected dryly, would be a poor time to be hung as a horse thief. There was no gate at the corral on this side so I climbed over, crossing the corral. At the corner I stopped in my tracks. A horse was tied to the corral, a horse stripped but recently of a saddle, a dun horse that showed evidence of hard riding! And in the damp earth near the trough was a boot print. Kneeling, I examined the hocks of the tied horse. From one of them I picked a shred of wool, then another. Spinning around I raced for the restaurant. "Katie!" I demanded. "Who owns that horse? Did you see the rider?"

"If you're thinkin' o' Park, that horse couldn't carry him far. An' he would not stay in the town. Not him."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"Nobody—wait a minute! I did so. 'Twas Jake Booker. Not that I saw him with the horse, but a bit before daylight he came around the corner from that way and asked if I'd coffee ready."

Booker! He had small feet. He was in with Park. He wanted Maclaren dead. He had killed Slade's man and shot our horses. Booker had some explaining to do.

Mulvaney was crawling from the loft where I'd slept but was all attention at once. He listened, then ran to the stable office. Waiting only until he was on a horse and racing from town, I started back to O'Hara's. My mind was made up.

The time had come for a showdown, and this time we would all be in it, and Jake Booker would not be forgotten.

KEY CHAPIN looked up when I came up. "Key," I said quickly, "this is the pay off. Find out for me where Booker is. Get somebody to keep an eye on him. He's not to leave town if he tries. Keep him under observation all the time until Mulvaney gets back from the ranch."

Turning to Olga, I asked her, "How about Canaval? Can he ride yet? Could he stand a buckboard trip?"

She hesitated. "He couldn't ride, but he might stand it in the buckboard."

"Then get him into town, and have the boys come with him. Fox especially. I like that man Fox, and Canaval may need protection. Bring him in, and bring him here."

"What is it? What have you learned?" Chapin demanded.

"About everything I need to know," I replied. "We're going to save the Bar M for Olga, and perhaps we'll save my ranch, too. In any event, we'll have the man who killed Rud Maclaren!"

"What?" Olga's face was pale. "Matt, do you mean that?"

"I do. I only hope that Tharp gets back with Morgan Park, but I doubt if we'll see him again." Turning to Key, who was at the door. "Another thing. We might as well settle it all. Send a rider to the CP and have Jim Pinder in here. Get him here fast. We'll have our showdown the first thing in the morning."

Twice I walked up the street and back. Nowhere was there any sign of Bodie Miller, nor of Red, his riding partner. The town still had that sense of expectancy that I had noticed upon coming into town. And they were right—for a lot of things were going to happen and happen fast.

Key met me in the saloon. He walked toward me quickly, his face alive with interest. "What have you got in mind, Matt? What are you planning?"

"Several things. In the first place,

there has been enough fighting and trouble. We're going to end it right here. We're going to close up this whole range fight. There aren't going to be any halfway measures. How well do you know Tharp?"

"Very well, why?"

"Will he throw his weight with us? It would mean a lot if he would."

"You can bank on him. He's a solid man, Matt. Very solid."

"All right, in the morning then. In the morning we'll settle everything!"

There was a slight movement at the door and I looked up. My pulse almost stopped with the shock of it.

Bodie Miller stood there, his hands on his hips, his lips smiling. "Why, sure!" he said. "If that's what you want. The morning is as good a time as any!"

XII

THE sun came up clear and hot. Already at daybreak the sky was without a cloud, and the distant mountains seemed to shimmer in a haze of their own making. The desert lost itself in heat waves before the day had scarce begun, and there was a stillness lying upon both desert and town, a sort of poised awareness without sound.

When I emerged upon the street I was alone. Like a town of ghosts, the street was empty, silent except for the echo of my steps on the boardwalk. Then, as if their sound had broken the spell, the saloon door opened and the bartender emerged and began to sweep off the walk. He glanced quickly around at me, bobbed his head, and then with an uneasy look around, finished his sweeping hurriedly and ducked back inside. A man carrying two wooden buckets emerged from an alley and looked cautiously about. Assured there was no one in sight he started across the street, glancing apprehensively first in one direction, then the other.

Sitting down in one of the polished chairs before the saloon I tipped back my hat and stared at the mountains. In a few minutes or a few hours, I might be dead.

It was not a good morning on which to die—but what morning is? Yet in a few minutes or hours another man and myself would probably meet out there in that street, and we would exchange shots, and one or both of us would die.

A rider came into the street, Mulvaney. He left his horse at the stable and clumped over to me. He was carrying enough guns to fight a war.

"Comin'," Mulvaney said, "the whole kit an' kaboodle of 'em. Be here within the hour. Jolly's already in town. Jonathan went after the others."

Nodding, I watched a woman looking down the street from the second floor. Suddenly she turned and left the window as if she had seen something or been called.

"Eat yet?"

"Not yet."

"Seen Olga? Or Chapin?"

"No."

"If Red cuts into this scrap," Mulvaney said, "he's mine."

"You can have him."

A door slammed somewhere, and then the man with the two wooden buckets hurried fearfully across the street, slopping water at every step. "All right," I said, "we'll go eat."

There was no sign of Bodie Miller, nor of Jim Pinder. Sheriff Tharp was still out hunting Morgan Park. Unless he got back soon I'd have to run my show alone.

MOTHER O'HARA had a white tablecloth over the oilcloth, and her best dishes were out. She brought me coffee and said severely, "You should be ashamed. That girl laid awake half the night, thinkin' of nothin' but you!"

"About *me?*" I was incredulous.

"Yes, about you! Worried fair sick, she is! About you an' that Bodie Miller!"

The door opened and Olga walked in.

Her eyes were very green today, and her hair drawn back to a loose knot at the back of her neck, but curled slightly into two waves on her forehead. She avoided my glance and it was well she did or I'd have come right out of my chair.

Then men entered the restaurant—Chapin, looking unusually severe, Colonel D'Arcy and last of all, Jake Booker.

D'Arcy caught my eye and a slow smile started on his lips. "Sabre! Well, I'm damned! The last time I saw Sabre he was in China!"

He took my hand and we grinned at each other. He was much older than I, but we talked the same language. His hair was gray at the temples. "They say you've had trouble with Cantwell."

"And more to come if the sheriff doesn't get him. Park is mixed up in a shady deal with Jake Booker, the man across the table from me."

"I?" Booker smiled but his eyes were deadly. "You're mistaken, Mr. Sabre. It is true that Mr. Park asked me to represent him in some trouble he was having, but we've no other connection. None at all."

Jim Pinder stalked in at that moment, but knowing that Mulvaney and Jolly were watching, I ignored him.

"From the conversation I overheard in Silver Reef," I said to Booker, "I gathered you had obtained a buyer for some mining property he expected to have."

Fury flickered across his face. He had no idea how much I knew.

"It might interest you to know, Booker, that the fighting in this area is over. Pinder is here and we're having a peace meeting. Pinder is making a deal with us and with the Bar M. The fun's over."

"I ain't said nothin' about no deal," Pinder declared harshly. "I come in because I figured you was ready to sell."

"I might buy, Pinder, but I wouldn't sell. Furthermore, I'm with Chapin and Tharp in organizing this peace move. You can join or stay out, but if you don't join you'll have to haul supplies from Silver Reef. This town will be closed to you. Each of us who has been in this fight is to put up a bond to keep the peace, effective at daybreak tomorrow. You can join or leave the country."

"After you killed my brother?" Pinder demanded. "You ask for peace?"

"You started the trouble in the livery stable figuring you were tough enough to hire me or run me out of the country. You weren't big enough or fast enough then, and you aren't now. Nobody doubts your nerve. You've too much for your own good, and so have the lot of us, but it gets us nothing but killing and more killing. You can make money on the CP, or you can try to buck the country.

"As for Rollie, he laid for me and he got what he asked for. You're a hard man, Pinder, but you're no fool, and I've an idea you're square. Isn't it true Rollie started out to get me?"

Pinder hesitated, rubbing his angular jaw. "It is," he said finally, "but that don't make no—"

"It makes a lot of difference," I replied shortly. "Now look, Pinder. You've lost more than you've cost us. You need money. You can't ship cattle. You sign up or you'll never ship any! Everybody here knows you've nerve enough to face me, but everybody knows you'd die. All you'd prove would be that you're crazy. You know I'm the faster man."

HE STARED stubbornly at the table. Finally he said, "I'll think it over. It'll take some time."

"It'll take you just two minutes," I said, laying it on the line.

He stared hard at me, his knuckles whitening on the arm of the chair. Suddenly, reluctantly, he grinned. Sinking back into his chair, he shrugged. "You ride a man hard, Sabre. All right, peace it is."

"Thanks, Pinder." I thrust out my hand. He hesitated, then took it.

Katie O'Hara filled his cup.

"Look," he said suddenly, "I've got to make a drive. The only way there's water is across your place."

"What's wrong with that? Drive 'em across, and whatever water your herd needs is yours. Just so it doesn't take you more than a week to get 'em across!"

Pinder smiled bleakly, but with humor. "Aw, you know it won't take more'n a day!" He subsided into his chair and started on the coffee.

Jake Booker had been taking it all in, looking from one to the other of us with his sharp little eyes.

Canaval opened the door and stepped in, looking pale and drawn, followed by Tom Fox. "Miss Olga could have signed for me," he said. "She's the owner."

"You sign, too," I insisted. "We want to cover every eventuality."

Booker was smiling. He rubbed his lips with his thin, dry fingers. "All nonsense!" he said briskly. "Both the Bar M and the Two Bar belong to me. I've filed the papers. You've twenty-four hours to get off and stay off!"

"Booker," I said, "has assumed we are fools. He believed if he could get a flimsy claim he could get us into court and beat us. Well, this case will never go to court."

Booker's eyes were beady. "Are you threatening me?"

Sheriff Will Tharp came into the room. His eyes rested on Jake but he said nothing.

"We aren't threatening," I said. "On what does your claim to the Bar M stand?"

"Bill of sale," he replied promptly. "The ranch was actually left to Jay Collins, the gunfighter. He was Maclaren's brother-in-law. His will left all his property to a nephew, and I bought it, including the Bar M and all appurtenances thereto!"

Canaval gave me a brief nod. "Sorry, Jake. You've lost your money. Jay Collins is not dead."

The lawyer jumped as if slapped. "Not *dead?* I saw his grave!"

"Booker," I smiled, "look down the table at Jay Collins!" I pointed to Canaval.

BOOKER broke into a fever of protest, but I was looking at Olga Maclaren. She was staring at Canaval and he was smiling.

"Sure, honey," he said. "That's why I knew so much about your mother. She was the only person in the world I ever really loved—until I knew my niece."

Booker was worried now, really worried. In a matter of minutes half his plan had come to nothing. He was shrewd enough to know we would not bluff, and that we had proof of what we said.

"As for the Two Bar," I added, "don't worry about it. I've my witnesses that the estate was given me. Not that it will matter to you."

"What's that? What'd you mean?" Booker stared at me.

"Because you were too greedy. You'll never rob another man, Booker. For murder, you'll hang."

He protested, but now he was cornered and frightened. "You killed Rud Maclaren," I told him, "and if that's not enough, you killed one of Slade's men from ambush. We can trail your horse to the scene of the crime, and if you think a Western jury won't take the word of an Indian tracker, you're wrong."

"*He* killed Maclaren?" Canaval asked incredulously.

"He got him out of the house on some trumped up excuse. To show him the silver, or to show him something I was planning—it doesn't matter what excuse was used. He shot him, then loaded him on a horse and brought him to my place. He shot him again hoping to draw me to the vicinity as he wanted my tracks around the body."

"Lies!" Booker was recovering his assurance. "Sabre had trouble with Maclaren, not I. We knew each other

only by sight. The idea that I killed him is preposterous."

He got to his feet. "In any event, what have the ranches to do with the silver claim of which you speak?"

"Morgan Park found the claim while trailing a man he meant to murder, Arnold D'Arcy who knew him as Cantwell. Arnold had stumbled upon the old mine. Park murdered him only to find there was a catch in the deal. D'Arcy had already filed on the claim and had done assessment work on it. Legally there was no way Park could gain possession, and no one legally could work the mine until D'Arcy's claim lapsed. Above all, Park wanted to avoid any public connection with the name of D'Arcy. He couldn't sell the claim, because it wasn't his, but if he could get control of the Bar M and the Two Bar, across which anyone working the claim must go, he could sell them at a fabulous price to an unscrupulous buyer. The new owner of the ranches could work the claim quietly, and by owning the ranches he could deny access to the vicinity so it would never be discovered what claims were being worked. When D'Arcy's assessment work lapsed, the claims could be filed upon by the new owners."

"Booker was to find a buyer?" asked Tharp.

"Yes. Park wanted money, not a mine or a ranch. Booker, I believe, planned to be that buyer himself. He wanted possession of the Bar M, so he decided to murder Rud Maclaren."

"You've no case against me that would stand in court!" Booker sneered. "You can prove nothing! What witnesses do you have?"

We had none, of course. Our evidence was a footprint. All the rest of what I'd said was guesswork. Tharp couldn't arrest the man on such slim grounds. We needed a confession.

TOM FOX leaned over the table, his eyes cold. "Some of us are satisfied. We don't need witnesses an' we don't need to hear no more. Some of us are almighty sure you killed Rud Maclaren. Got any arguments that will answer a six-gun? Or a rope?"

Booker's face thinned down and he crouched back against his chair. "You can't do that! The law! Tharp will protect me!"

Sighting a way clear, I smiled. "That might be, Booker! Confess and Tharp will protect you! He'll save you for the law to handle. But if you leave here a free man, you'll be on your own."

"An' I'll come after you!" Fox said.

"Confess, Booker," I suggested, "and you'll be safe."

"Aw! Turn him loose!" Fox protested angrily. "No need to have trouble, a trial an' all! Turn him loose! We all know he's a crook an' we all know he killed Rud Maclaren! Turn him loose!"

Booker's eyes were haunted with fear. There was no acting in Tom Fox and he knew it. The rest of us might bluff, but not Fox. The Bar M hand wanted to kill him, and given an opportunity, he would.

Right then I knew we were going to win. Jake Booker was a plotter and a conniver, not a courageous man. His mean little eyes darted from Fox to the sheriff. His mouth twitched and his face was wet with sweat. Tom Fox, his hand on his gun, moved relentlessly closer to Booker.

"All right, then!" he screamed. "I did it! I killed Maclaren. Now, sheriff, save me from this man!"

I relaxed at last, as Tharp put the handcuffs on Booker. As they were leaving I said, "What about Park? What happened to him?"

Tharp cleared his throat. "Morgan Park is dead. He was killed last night on the Woodenshoe."

WE ALL looked at him, waiting. "That Apache of Pinder's killed him," Tharp explained. "Park ran for it after he busted out of jail. He killed his horse crossin' the flats an' he run

into the Injun with a fresh horse. He wanted to swap, the 'Pache wouldn't go for the deal, so Park tried to dry-gulch him. He should have knowed better. The Injun killed him an' lit out."

"You're positive?" D'Arcy demanded.

Tharp nodded. "Yeah, he died hard, Park did."

The door opened and Jonathan Benaras was standing there. "Been scoutin' around," he said. "Bodie Miller's done took out. He hit the saddle about a half-hour back an' headed north out of town."

Bodie Miller gone!

It was impossible. Yet, he had done it. Miller was gone! I got to my feet. "Good," I said quietly, "I was afraid there would be trouble."

Pinder got to his feet. "Don't yuh trust that Miller," he said grudgingly. "He's a snake in the grass. You watch out."

So there it was. Pinder was no longer an enemy. The fight had been ended and I could go back to the Two Bar. I should feel relieved, and yet I did not. Probably it was because I had built myself up for Bodie Miller and nothing had come of it. I was so ready, and then it all petered out to nothing at all.

Olga had the Bar M, and her uncle to run it for her, and nobody would be making any trouble for Canaval. There was nothing for me to do but to go back home.

MY HORSE was standing at the rail and I walked out to him and lifted the stirrup leather to tighten the cinch. But I did not hurry. Olga was standing there in front of the restaurant, and the one thing I wanted most was to talk to her. When I looked up she was standing there alone.

"You're going back to the Two Bar?" Her voice was hesitant.

"Where else? After all, it's my home now."

"Have—have you done much to the house yet?"

"Some." I tightened the cinch, then unfastened the bridle reins. "Even a killer has to have a home." It was rough, and I meant it that way.

She flushed. "You're not holding that against me?"

"What else can I do? You said what you thought, didn't you?"

She stood there looking at me, uncertain of what to say, and I let her stand there.

She watched me put my foot in the stirrup and swing into the saddle. She looked as if she wanted to say something, but she did not. Yet when I looked down at her she was more like a little girl who had been spanked than anything else I could think of.

Suddenly, I was doing the talking. "Ever start that trousseau I mentioned?"

She looked up quickly. "Yes," she admitted, "but—but I'm afraid I didn't get very far with it. You see, there was—"

"Forget it." I was brusque. "We'll do without it. I was going to ride out of here and let you stay, but I'll be double damned if I will. I told you I was going to marry you, and I am. Now listen, trousseau or not, you be ready by tomorrow noon, understand?"

"Yes. All right. I mean—I will."

Suddenly, we were both laughing like fools and I was off that horse and kissing her, and all the town of Hattan's Point could see us. It was right there in front of the cafe, and I could see people coming from the saloons and standing along the boardwalks, all grinning.

Then I let go of her and stepped back, and said, "Tomorrow noon. I'll meet you here." And with that I wheeled my horse and lit out for the ranch.

EVER feel so good it looks as if the whole world is your big apple? That was the way I felt. I had all I ever wanted. Grass, water, cattle, and with a home and wife of my own.

The trail back to the Two Bar swung

around a huge mesa and opened out on a wide desert flat, and far beyond it I could see the suggestion of the stones and pinnacles of bad lands beyond Dry Mesa. A rabbit burst from the brush and sprinted off across the sage, and then the road dipped down into a hollow. There in the middle of the road was Bodie Miller.

He was standing with his hands on his hips laughing and there was a devil in his eyes. Off to one side of the road was Red, holding their horses and grinning too.

"Too bad!" Bodie said. "Too bad to cut down the big man just when he's ridin' highest, but I'll enjoy it."

This horse I rode was skittish and unacquainted with me. I'd no idea how he'd stand for shooting, and I wanted on the ground. Suddenly I slapped spurs to that gelding, and when the startled animal lunged toward the gunman I went off the other side. Hitting the ground running I spun on one heel and saw Bodie's hands blur as they dove for their guns, and then I felt my own gun buck in my hand. Our bullets crossed each other, but mine was a fraction the fastest despite that instant of hesitation when I made sure it would count.

HIS slug ripped a furrow across my shoulder that stung like a thousand needles, but my own bullet caught him in the chest and he staggered back, his eyes wide and agonized. Then I started forward and suddenly the devil was up in me. I was mad, mad as I had never been before. I opened up with both guns. "What's the matter?" I was yelling. "Don't you like it, gunslick? You asked for it, now come and get it! Fast, are you? Why you cheap, two-bit gunman, I'll—"

But he was finished. He stood there, a slighter man than I was, with blood turning his shirt front crimson, and with his mouth ripped by another bullet. He was white as death, even his lips were gray, and against that whiteness was the splash of blood. In his eyes now there was another look. The killing lust was gone, and in its place was an awful terror, for Bodie Miller had killed, and enjoyed it with a kind of sadistic bitterness that was in him—but now he knew he was being killed and the horror of death was surging through him.

"Now you know how they felt, Bodie," I said bitterly. "It's an ugly thing to die with a slug in you because some punk wants to prove he's tough. And you aren't tough, Bodie, just mean."

He stared at me, but he didn't say anything. He was gone, and I could see it. Something kept him upright, standing in that white hot sun, staring at me, the last face he would ever look upon.

"You asked for it, Bodie, but I'm sorry for it. Why didn't you stay to punching cows?"

[*Turn page*]

Distilled from 100% Grain Neutral Spirits — 90 Proof
Mr. Boston Distiller Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Bodie backed up another step, and his gun slid from his fingers. He tried to speak, and then his knees buckled and he went down. Standing over him, I looked at Red.

"I'm ridin'," Red said huskily. "Just give me a chance." He swung into the saddle, then looked down at Bodie. "He wasn't so tough, was he?"

"Nobody is," I told him. "Nobody's tough with a slug in his belly."

He rode off, and I stood there in the trail with Bodie dead at my feet. Slowly, I holstered my gun, then led my horse off the trail to the shade where Bodie's horse still stood.

Lying there in the dusty trail Bodie Miller no longer looked mean or even tough, he looked like a kid that had tackled a job that was too big for him.

There was a small gully off the trail. It looked like a grave, and I used it that way. Rolling him into it, I shoved the banks in on top of him and then piled on some stones. Then I made a cross for him and wrote his name on it, and the words: HE PLAYED OUT HIS HAND. Then I hung his guns on the cross and his hat.

It was not much of an end for a man, not any way you looked at it, but I wanted no more reputation as a killer —mine had already grown too big.

Maybe Red would tell the story, and maybe in time somebody would see the grave, but if Red's story was told it would be somewhere far away and long after, and that suited me.

A stinging in my own shoulder reminded me of my own wound, but when I opened my shirt and checked my shoulder I found it a mere scratch.

Ahead of me the serrated ridges of the wild lands were stark and lonely along the sky, and the sun behind me was picking out the very tips of the peaks to touch them with gold. Somehow the afternoon was gone, and now I was riding home to my own ranch, and tomorrow was my wedding day.

The Name Is—

BRANNIGAN

The Author Is—

CHUCK MARTIN

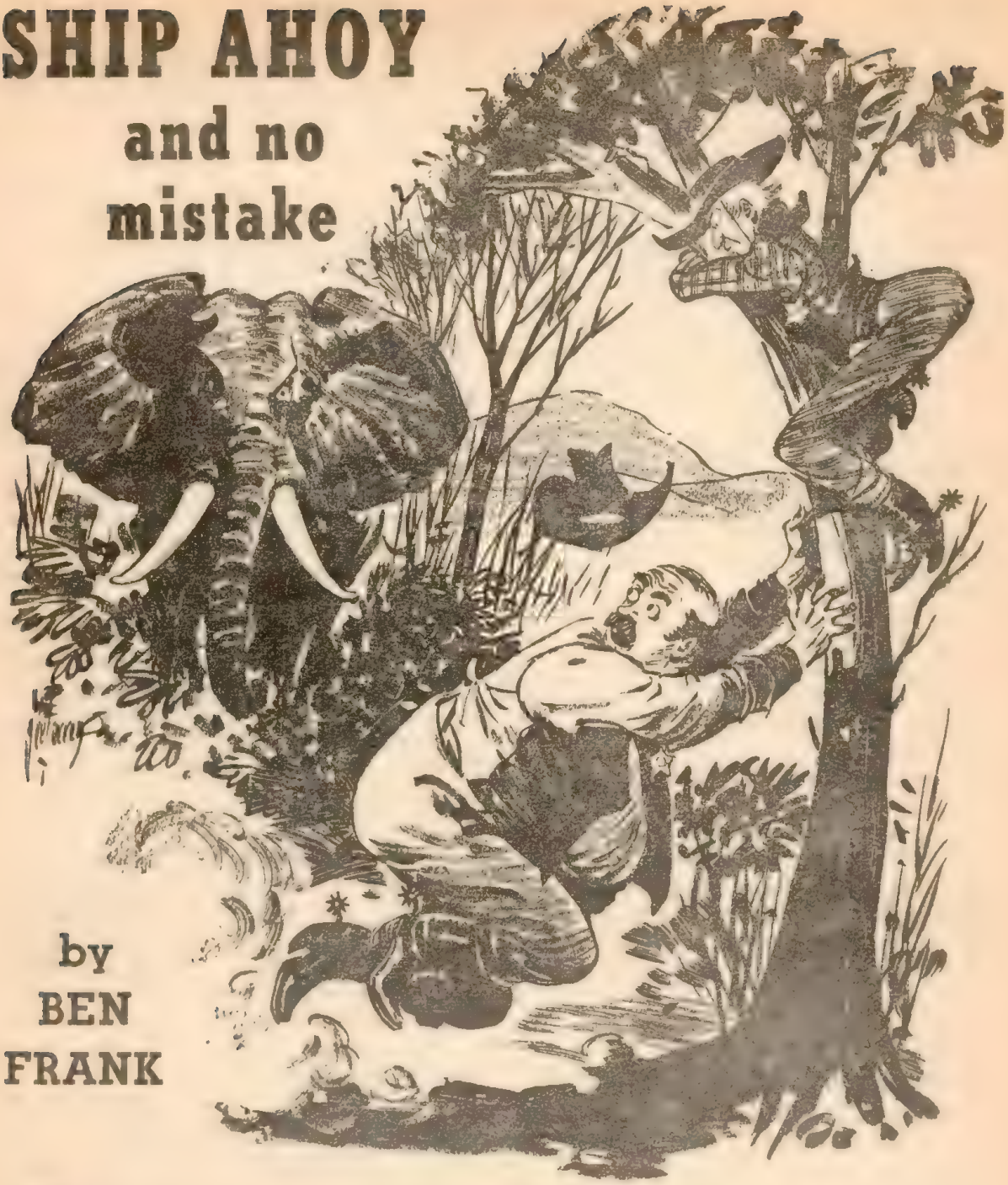
And It's All About—

A Three-Cornered Range War in Old Oklahoma!

Read This Smashing Novel Next Issue—Plus

Many Other Rousing Yarns of the Rangeland!

SHIP AHOY and no mistake



by BEN FRANK

MY dear," I say to my wife at breakfast, "tomorrow is when the Bingham Brothers Circus comes to Polecat."

"So what?" she says.

"I," I say wishful, "being fond of circuses, would enjoy attending if I had two dollars for—"

"Hopewell," she says harsh, "I am surprised at you, a grown man and deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., wanting to go to a circus. Besides I will not give you two dollars, and that is final, and I wish to add—"

I put on my hat and depart, for there

The Sheriff of Coyote County Hankers for Ye Olde Pirate Days!

is no telling where all this conversation will end.

Walking along Polecat's one street, I cannot help observing numerous posters of pretty girls smiling at me, standing on their heads and swinging graceful from trapezes, and lions baring their fangs, and Jumbo, the biggest elephant in captivity, and the fattest lady in the world, who is fatter even than Boo Boo Bounce, the sheriff of Coyote County. And thinking of Boo Boo, I resolve to ask him for a loan of two smackeroos.

ARRIVING at the jail, I go into the office and see Boo Boo is wide awake and setting at his desk, his three chins quivering agitated and his eyes very protruding in his round red face, reading a book.

"Boo Boo," I say, "tomorrow I wish to attend the—"

"Avast, yuh lubber!" he says husky without glancing up. "Kindly set down on the poop deck and maintain a quiet quiet!"

Somewhat startled, I set down on a chair.

Boo Boo turns a page. His face pales slightly. A short time later, he brushes clammy sweat from his bald head and shakes his fist violent. Then he reads a little farther, heaves a relieved sigh, folds the page over careful and looks at me.

"Ship, ahoy!" he shouts. "Man the mainsail!"

"What?" I gasp, utmostly astounded.

"Yo, ho ho and a bottle of rum! Fifteen men on a dead man's chest, and no mistake!"

"Boo Boo," I cry, "what is all this rum and—"

"Hopewell," he says, smiling pleasant, "ain't you never read 'Treasure Island?' "

"Why, no," I answer.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, "this is a no-little exciting book, and then some. It is about some hombres going to a island whereat fierce pirates buried a wagon-load or so of gold, and amongst them was a very dangerous gent with one leg, who only a brave man would care to meet in broad daylight."

"Do tell," I say polite.

"Them were the days," Boo Boo says wistful. "Pirates and buried treasure and dead men on a chest. Hopewell, I was borned a number of years too late."

"Kindly explain," I say, puzzled.

"I," Boo Boo says, "find I am a man who craves adventure and thrives on excitement, but am doomed to live in a period of time when there is no excitement or adventures worth mentioning. Pirates and such are no more, and all the buried treasure has been dug up, leaving nothing for such as me but to dream about the things that stirs a he-man's blood to the boiling point."

"A time or two," I murmur, "we have had advent—"

"Phooey!" Boo Boo snorts disdainful. "Nothing ever happens no more. Civilization has ruined the world for such as I, who yearns for the ring of steel on steel, the roar of wild beasts, the—"

"Tomorrow," I say hopeful, "there is a circus here with wild beasts, and if I had two ringers, I—"

"That is the trouble," Boo Boo says, pounding a fist on his desk. "On account of nothing ever happening, people have to go to a circus for excitement. Leave me add that on this treasure island, nobody needed no circus to keep him awake, and no mis—"

"Boo Boo, I will settle for the circus, should you lend me—"

"No!" Boo Boo says emphatic. "And kindly go get our morning mail and do not hurry back, for I wish to read undisturbed."

I put on my hat and depart, not liking this thirst for adventure which Boo Boo has at the present. I go to the post office, but there is no mail. I wander on along the street to Chin-nick Chancy's barber shop. Chin-nick, I see, has a customer in his chair, who at the moment I do not recognize with his face covered with lather.

I step in, and Chin-nick says, "Hope-

well, what're yuh looking so down in the mouth about?"

"Boo Boo," I answer, "is reading a book about pirates."

"Speakin' of Boo Boo," the gent in the chair says, setting up of a sudden, "reminds me why I come to town today."

I see who he is now, being none other than Forgetful Finnegan, a long, lean homesteader living on Skunk Creek.

"Till you mentioned his name, Hopewell," he goes on, "it plumb slipped my mind that I had come to Polecat to see Boo Boo."

He lays back in his chair and sighs deep. "But now I can't remember what I wanted to see him about, so go ahead with yore shaving, Chin-nick."

Chin-nick gives his razor a couple of whets. "Hopewell, kindly continue about this pirate business and Boo Boo."

"Why," I say, "reading of pirates has made Boo Boo utmostly dissatisfied with life, thusly making him a trying gent to get along with, especially when it comes to borrowing two dollars from, which my wife will not give me to attend—"

"Wife!" Forgetful says, setting up and pawing the lather from his bony face. "Now I recall why I wanted to see Boo Boo!"

HE JUMPS to his feet, grabs his hat and heads for the door.

"If I don't forget," he says, "I'll come back for the rest of my shave some other time, Chin-nick. Hopewell, you come with me, for should I forget again why I wanted to see Boo Boo, you can remind me that yesterday my wife disappeared."

He heads down the street at a brisk lope, and I follow. But before we reach the jail, who should we overtake but old man Dooley, the depot agent, who grabs my arm, stopping me sudden.

"Hopewell," he says, "if you're on your way to the jail, take this telegram to Boo Boo for me."

I take the telegram from him and hurry on to the jail with Forgetful Finnegan, us rushing into the office and letting the door slam violent.

Boo Boo lets out a squawk and drops his book. Seeing who we are, his chins begin to quiver with anger.

"For a second," he says, "I thought that one-legged pirate was rushing me with a knife betwixt his teeth and a gun in each hand. But it turns out to be you two pickle-heads. Oh why, oh why, was I doomed to live a unexciting life amidst—"

"Boo Boo," I say, "excitement is at hand. Forgetful's wife has disappeared!"

"Shore has," Forgetful says. "I got up this morning, an' no breakfast cooked. I looked around the place, an' no wife. So, sheriff, I figured as how I ought to ask you to investigate into the matter."

"Hum," Boo Boo says, scowling. "What is so exciting about that, I would like to know?"

"Boo Boo," I say, "Mrs. Finnegan may be kidnapped, or worse!"

"Why, yes," Boo Boo says, brightening somewhat. "I never thought of—" Then he scowls again. "On second thought, I doubt if anybody would kidnap— Forgetful, why don't yuh go home and wait around. Likely she'll show up sooner or—"

"Boo Boo," Forgetful says, growing wrathful, "I am a taxpayer and do not like the idea of no fat sheriff setting around, drawing his pay and doing nothing when there is a duty to be performed for a citizen. So if you do not want to lose my vote, you had better get into action and find out who run off with my—"

"Now, now, Forgetful," Boo Boo says soothful, "leave us not get our dander up. When did you see your wife last?"

"As near as I can remember, it was yesterday," Forgetful says. "Seems I was settin' in my rocker when she comes in the room an' says something. Don't recall seein' her since."

"What did she say?" Boo Boo asks.

"She talks so much I never pay no

attention," Forgetful answers. "Even if I had of listened, I couldn't remember."

"Forgetful," Boo Boo says, "you may rest assured that I will look into the matter, and no mistake. Good-bye."

Forgetful departs satisfied, and Boo Boo picks up his book. Then I remember the telegram and hand it to him.

"Hopewell," he says husky, "according to this, Dreadful Drew has escaped from jail whereat he was being held for a murder."

I feel a slight uneasiness, for Dreadful Drew was a former citizen of Coyote County and a gent with a very unsavory disposition.

"Boo Boo," I say, "the possibility of excitement and adventure is on the upgrade. You being a man who yearns for same, I will take a few days vacation and let you have all the—"

"Set down, Hopewell!" Boo Boo says firm, which I do.

"Now," he goes on, wagging a fat finger at me, "listen close. In the first place, do not get mixed up about pirates of long ago and outlaws of the present. They are hosses of a different color, and no mistake, and although I would love to test my mettle against pirates, I do not care to encounter Dreadful Drew. In the second place, we will set tight in our jail until all danger is past. In the third place, maybe Dreadful Drew will go elsewhere. As for Forgetful Finnegan's wife, we will not be in no hurry to look—"

At that moment, who should come in without knocking but old man Bundy, editor of the Polecat News, a gent who gets utmost pleasure from giving Boo Boo and I unfavorable write-ups in his paper.

"Gents," he says, grinning wicked, "Dooley showed me the telegram, and Finnegan told me about his wife. I didn't hardly expect to find you setting here so cozy when there is trouble afoot."

"Mr. Bundy," Boo Boo says impressive, "if you had come thirty seconds later, you would have found us gone forth to look for Mrs. Finnegan and to check if Dreadful Drew has been seen in—"

"And if he has been seen," Bundy interrupts sarcastic, "which way will you run, Boo Boo?"

"Mr. Bundy," Boo Boo says indignant, "leave me remind you that I, Boo Boo Bounce, always get his man, and

Bundy laughs cackly. "Don't let me detain you from doing your duty, Sheriff." He laughs again and walks out, leaving Boo Boo utmostly shaken.

"Deputy," he says hoarse, "now that ole Bundy knows all, he will give us no peace until we get busy. Leave us go."

"Shall I load our guns?" I inquire.

"Guns?" he says with a shudder, him being gunshy. "Indeed, no! Why should we take guns to go looking for Mrs. Finnegan?"

"But," I say, "should we meet up with Dreadful—"

"If we meet up with him," Boo Boo says, "I do not want no gun around to give him a excuse to start shooting."

"But," I murmur, "a moment ago, you was thirsting for the clash of steel on steel and—"

"Hopewell," he says frigid, "leave us keep your big mouth shut and get a move on."

WE saddle our horses and ride forth along the street.

"Boo Boo," I observe, "there are two strange saddle horses tied in front of Stinky Joe's eating place."

"Strange hosses have been tied there before," he says, sniffing.

"But," I say, "this is the first time I have seen such with heavy ropes and log chains fastened to the saddles."

But Boo Boo is sniffing the smell of food coming from Stinky Joe's place and is paying no mind to anything else.

"Deputy," he says drooly, "leave us stop at the store and pick up a sack of crackers and cheese to munch on during our investigation of the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Finnegan."

We stop in front of Nail-head Nut-

ter's store, and I go in for food. When I come out, Boo Boo is talking to Shoe-on Sorby, so called because he sleeps with his shoes on, for he walks in his sleep and is afraid of skinning up a few toes without his shoes. I am no little surprised to see numerous bandages strung about Shoe-on's face, arms and hands like he has been in a fight with a barbed wire fence.

"Shoe-on," I say, "what happened?"

"Yesterday," he says, "I was walkin' from my pigpen to the barn and what should happen but my mule, Jessie, come staggerin' up to me very funny peculiar.

" 'Whoa, Jessie,' I says, and he says, 'He-haw,' an' bares his teeth. The next thing I know, he is biting me and kicking an' he-hawin' like crazy. Lucky I go into the barn and shut the door, or there wouldn't be enough of me left for Doc Porter to wrap a bandage around."

Boo Boo and I ride on, and I say, "As I remember Shoe-on's mule, he was a gentle critter, prone to stand in the shade and doze. Seems very strange that he would—"

"Deputy," Boo Boo says abrupt, "a woman as big as Mrs. Finnegan cannot disappear without leaving a trail. Leave us consider a means by which we can pick up clues the easiest and quickest which will lead us to her whereabouts. The sooner I can get back to my book about the days when there was honest to goodness excitement and adventure, the better I will like—"

"Boo Boo," I say, hoping to put him in a better humor, "numerous things have happened, which lumped together, might be considered somewhat exciting. Mrs. Finnegan disappearing. Dreadful Drew escaping from p r i s o n. Two strange horses in town. Shoe-on Sorby's mule turning violent. And tomorrow, the circus, and if I had two dollars—"

"Hopewell," he says, "I am not going to loan you two ringers to go to no circus, and no mistake! As for the other things you have mentioned—oh, oh, I have had a thought!"

"Such as?"

"We will ride over to the Injun village and pick up ole Chief Eagle Beak to go with us to Finnegan's place. There is no better tracker than Eagle Beak when he is sober."

Presently we come to Skunk Creek, dismount, set in the shade and eat our cheese and crackers. After a short rest, we go on to where Eagle Beak lives and knock on his cabin door.

He takes one look at us, says, "Eagle Beak innocent," and starts to shut the door, but Boo Boo sticks a foot in the way.

"Chief," Boo Boo says pleasant, "we have a little job of trailing for you to do."

"Chief Eagle Beak no little busy," the Indian says.

"Chief," Boo Boo says, wagging a finger at him, "leave me put it this way. I do not know what dirty work you have been up to that gives you a guilty look, but if you do not care to co-operate, I will start looking around for something stole, or a jug of Pop Pully's firewater, or—"

"Glad to co-operate," Eagle Beak says hasty. "Glad to do'um for ole friend, Sheriff Boo—"

"Forgetful Finnegan's wife has disappeared," Boo Boo says, "and we want you to track her down for us."

"Ugg!" Eagle Beak says unhappy.

But he gets his knock-kneed pony and rides with us back to Skunk Creek.

Entering the cottonwood timber along the creek, Boo Boo says, "Treasure Island must've looked somewhat like this, Hopewell. Wild and lonesome. Fifteen men on a dead man's chest; yo, ho ho and a bottle of rum!"

"Rum," Eagle Beak says, smacking his lips. "Can smell Pop Pully's firewater stuff'um."

"Beats all how a Injun can smell," Boo Boo says mystified. "I can't smell no firewater brewin'. Can you, Deputy?"

I cannot and say so, but before long, I catch a whiff of sourness on the air and realize that Pop's corn mash is

kicking up a no-little stink. We ride over a hill and into a clearing, and there is Pop's cabin with heavy planks nailed over the two windows and Pop himself standing guard in the doorway with a corn knife tucked under his belt and a shotgun gripped in his hands.

"If this was a hundred years ago," Boo Boo says, "I would say that Pop is all fixed to protect hisself against a gang of pirates."

AT that moment, Pop sees us. He spits gushy from amongst his whiskers and says, "Howdy."

"Pop," Boo Boo bellows, for Pop is as deaf as a side of dressed beef, "how come you're armed to the hilt?"

"He shore did about get kilt," Pop says.

"What're you talking about?" Boo Boo asks, scowling bewildered.

"Don't you jaspers know better'n to be out without guns?" Pop says. "There's a elephant on the loose."

"Elephant," Boo Boo yells in Pop's good ear. "Pop, you've been drinking too much of your own forty—"

"Shoe-on Sorby was walkin' along yesterday, an' this here elephant grabbed him. Before Shoe-on could get away, he was might nigh kilt. Had to go to ole Doc Pink-pill Porter for—"

"Pop," Boo Boo says, "yuh've misunderstood. Shoe-on's mule went loco and—"

"I ain't no fool, or loco!" Pop yells. "I'm smart enough to—"

"No, no, Pop," Boo Boo says. "Mule! Jackass!"

"Boo Boo," Pop says, turning white, "I have a mind to whop you! Comin' to my place an' callin' me a—"

"Pop," I shout, "you're a mite mixed up about Shoe-on. It wasn't a elephant. It was his mule, Jessie."

"You oughta see my apple tree," Pop says. "Some day I'm goin' to shoot that dad-burned mule with a load of rock salt. But this here elephant—"

"When Pop," Boo Boo says disgusted, "gets a idea in his brain—"

"Rain wouldn't help none," Pop says, "as long as this elephant—"

"Pop," Boo Boo says, "go jump down a well, or—"

"Does smell mighty strong," Pop says, frowning. "But when I found a couple dead rats in that barrel of corn mash, nothin' else to do but dump it out on the ground."

"Ugg!" Eagle Beak says, looking worried.

Boo Boo says, "Leave us waste no more time here."

Once again, we ride into the timber, and Boo Boo says, "A man as deaf as Pop had ought to learn how to read so's you could write him what is going on. The idea of him thinking a elephant—"

"Ugg!" Chief Eagle Beak says, pointing to the ground.

Boo Boo and I pull up short to stare down at the ground. There is nothing to see but the grass mashed somewhat flat.

"Could be elephant track!" Eagle Beak says, shuddering.

"Eagle Beak," Boo Boo says, "you're as loco as ole Pop—"

He stops talking, for Eagle Beak has whirled his pony about and is riding away no little rapid.

"Ship, ahoy!" Boo Boo bellows angry. "Come back, or—"

But Eagle Beak has disappeared from sight.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, his chins quivering wrathful, "now we are without a tracker for Mrs. Finnegan. Think of something."

"It is not far to Shoe-on Sorby's place," I say. "Perhaps we could borrow his hound to use, since Shoe-on is unlikely able to go hunting for a few days."

"Hopewell," Boo Boo smiles, "you are a smart thinker-upper."

We cross the creek, ride through the timber to Shoe-on Sorby's homestead, which he has cleared enough for his cabin, barn, potato patch and pig pen, and stop at a big wooden watering trough to let our horses drink. Shoe-on is setting in the doorway of his cabin,

looking somewhat miserable behind his bandages and smoking his pipe. We tie our horses to the pump and cross the clearing toward the cabin. I set down to rest with my back against one of the two small trees Shoe-on has for shade.

"Shoe-on," Boo Boo asks pleasant, "how're yuh feeling?"

"Better," Shoe-on says, "but worried to a frazzle."

"What about?" Boo Boo asks.

"First, my hound dog, Patricia, has disappeared."

"Oh, oh!" Boo Boo says. "I was about to see if I could borrow him to track Mrs. Finnegan."

"Patricia being strictly a coon dog, I doubt if he would, although he likes Mrs. Finnegan for giving him bones to chew on."

"What else worries yuh?"

"Jessie," Shoe-on says. "That mule has busted loose an' gone gallivantin' off some'ers same as he did yesterday before he come home an' bit me between the barn an' the pig pen."

"That reminds me," Boo Boo says. "Pop Pully has got it in his head you was chewed up by a elephant instead of Jessie."

"A elephant," Shoe-on says. "Ha, ha!"

We are chuckling pleasantly at Pop's misunderstanding when there comes the sound of running feet thrashing through the brush and blood-curdling yells. The next thing we know, Forgetful Finnegan comes racing from amongst the timber toward us, hair flying wild, eyes bugging, face white. "Avast, ahoy, Forgetful!" Boo Boo says.

But Forgetful pays him no mind. He runs past us, jumps over Shoe-on Sorby, setting on the door step, flings himself inside the house. He slams the door shut violent, and we hear the bolt on the inside shot in place.

"Forgetful," Shoe-on sputters, "whose house do yuh think this is? Yourn, or—"

"Forgetful," I murmur, "looked like he was scared to death."

"Come to think of it, he did," Shoe-on agrees.

"Forgetful," Boo Boo calls firm, "kindly open up in the name of the Law and leave us explain why—"

"Boo Boo," Forgetful pants, "as long as I am this scared, I will not unlock the door for you nor nobody else, even if I can't remember what scared me."

"Now, looky," Boo Boo says indignant, "no man can be that scared and forget what did it to him. Not even you. Open up, or—"

"Oh, oh!" Shoe-on says in a hushed voice. "Look!"

Boo Boo and I look, and what we see makes us forget Forgetful Finnegan for the moment.

COMING toward us is Eagle-Beak's pony on which a long-legged, hard-faced gent is riding with a sixgun in his hand and a thumb holding back the hammer very careless.

"Dreadful Drew!" Boo Boo and I say in the same breath.

"Right, gentlemen," Dreadful Drew says, smiling unfunny. "Now leave me have a good look at you and see if I can recall your names."

He slides to the ground and steps forward, his eyes reminding me of twenty below zero with a strong wind out of the north.

"Ah, ha!" he says. "Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce and his deputy! Don't tell me you two have come a-lookin' for me without your guns?"

"Dreadful," Boo Boo says hoarse, "whatever made you think we would be looking for you?"

"Lawmen, ain't yuh?" Dreadful clips, his eyes narrowing dangerous. "Although yuh never gave me no trouble worth mentionin' in the past when I lived hereabouts, I still don't like lawmen, an'—"

"Leave me say," Shoe-on says husky, "I am not a lawman."

"I do not recognize your face under all them bandages, friend," Dreadful says, "but I do not like what I can see of you, so kindly do not interrupt me again!"

His eyes stop freezing us to look at our horses.

"Well, well," he says happy. "I believe I will discard that bag of bones I took from ole Eagle Beak and borrow your horses and saddles, gents. But first"—again his eyes turn on us, making me wish I was a million miles elsewhere—"I have a good notion to make examples of you two star-toters for others who may have a idea they would like to collect the reward offered for me, dead or alive. Therefore, if yuh have any last words to say, get busy an'—"

There comes a great commotion from the near distance, and lifting our eyes, we see Shoe-on's mule, Jessie, coming across the potato patch, his head and tail held high, his two ears pointing skyward like horns. He is frothing at the mouth, rolling his eyes and letting out blood-curdling he-haws at every step. It is indeed such an astounding sight that I can think of nothing else but Jessie.

He comes to the big horse tank, bunches his muscles and leaps over it like a jackrabbit over a cracker box. For a split-second, he hesitates, trying to make up his mind what to do next. Sudden-like he decides, lets out a terrifying bray and goes after Eagle Beak's pony. The pony snorts horrified and heads for the tall timber.

Jessie does not follow. He rears up on his hind legs, flaps his front feet like a rooster crowing and charges for Boo Boo's and my horses tied to the pump.

Dreadful Drew lets out a harsh cuss-word, grabs up a stick of stove wood and starts after Jessie. Jessie pays him no mind but continues toward our horses, who are pulling back, trying to break away. Dreadful flings the stove wood, hitting Jessie very painful on the rear. Jessie snorts furious, digs his feet into the ground, whirls and faces Dreadful with bloodshot eyes filled with hate.

The outlaw cusses again, and Jessie charges. Dreadful cuts loose with his six, but now he is no little nervous and cannot hit nothing. Before he can unlimber a second shot, Jessie reaches out, grabs the six in his teeth, whirls about and kicks Dreadful up against the horse tank.

Dreadful groans feeble and passes out cold. Jessie spits out the sixgun in order to he-haw no little triumphant, and then turns his blood-shot eyes on us utmostly menacing.

"Forgetful," Shoe-on bleats, pounding his fists on the door, "leave us inside! It is a matter of life or—"

"Not till I recall what scared me," Forgetful replies firm.

"Every man for himself!" Shoe-on says.

He dives for one of the trees and begins to climb upward. I take one last look at Jessie and start shinning up the other tree. Boo Boo also takes a look at Jessie and runs to the tree I am up.

"Hopewell," he wails, "give me a hand before that critter—"

"Boo Boo," I say, "find another tree. This one won't hardly hold me, let alone—"

At that moment, I see that Jessie has stopped his forward rush and is gazing toward the timber. Sudden like, he begins to paw the ground like a bull with a burr under his tail.

I look the way Jessie is gazing, and so does Shoe-on and Boo Boo, and what we see makes Dreadful Drew and Jessie seem no more dangerous in comparison than babies asleep in their mothers' arms.

Before we can take a long breath, Forgetful Finnegan says from inside the cabin, "Gents, now I remember what scared me. It was a wild elephant. He was a good forty feet tall, had red-rimmed eyes the size of dishpans, a trunk twenty feet long an' tusks the size of telegraph poles—an' I ain't goin' to open this door till I make sure he didn't follow, even if you won't believe—"

We believe him, all right, for this elephant he has described has stepped into the clearing, swinging his trunk vicious and flapping his ears violent and

glaring at us hateful out of smoldering eyes.

Boo Boo is the first to recover from shock. He lets out a gurgle and starts to climb my tree, making the bark fly. The tree begins to sway dizzy, and I say, "Boo Boo, be careful, or—"

But my warning comes too late. There is a sound of splintering wood, and Boo Boo, I and the tree pile up in a heap.

I AM the first to get to his feet and start to climb Shoe-on's tree, but Boo Boo is not far behind.

"Stay outa here," Shoe-on yells, "or I will kick your—"

He says no more, for with a groan and a crack, the tree gives way, and Shoe-on, Boo Boo and I are once again on the ground, defenseless, with no tree to climb and no place to go, except the cabin, which we canont get into. Howsome-ever, we make a rush for it and arrive at the door simultaneous and bellow, "Open up, Forgetful!"

"Not till I make sure that elephant—" Forgetful's voice ends in a hoarse squawk, for he has looked through a window and saw the elephant.

We hear a great crash of feet and feel the earth tremble. We face about with our backs to the door. There is nothing to do but take what comes, when all at once we see that the elephant has stopped by the tank and is eyeing Jessie somewhat curious and Jessie is eyeing the elephant undecided. "Sick 'em, Jessie!" Shoe-on says feeble.

But Jessie seems to figure the elephant too big to whip and looks like he is about ready to run, leaving nothing between us and a horrible end except thin air. Suddenly the elephant sticks his trunk into the tank, sucks up a few-odd gallons of water and lets fly at Jessie, hitting him just as he opens his mouth for one last he-haw.

Jessie shakes the water out of his eyes, and the hair along his back stands up like hackles on a dog. It is plain to be seen that he feels utmostly insulted at being thusly sprayed. He bares his teeth, he-haws a lusty challenge and gets set to jump over the tank and fight to the finish. But the water has made the ground somewhat slippery underfoot. The next thing we know, Jessie has missed his jump and is in the water tank, splashing and snorting violent.

The elephant loses interest in Jessie and turns toward us. He lifts his trunk and sends a thundering blast into the air. Then he ambles toward us like the side of a hill walking, stops a few feet away and reaches his trunk toward Boo Boo, who stands petrified and then some.

Just as I am about to shut my eyes so as not to see the horrible demise of poor Boo Boo, a strange voice yells, "Don't be scared, friend! Old Jumbo is merely looking for peanuts!"

Two gents on horses emerge from the timber with heavy ropes and log chains hanging from their saddles. The one with red whiskers says, "Jumbo, you old cuss, I ought to smack you for running away! Stand still while I fasten this chain on your foot."

The second gent smiles pleasant at us and says, "We're with the Bingham Brothers Circus. We were putting on a show in Northfork, and old Jumbo took a notion he wanted to look the country over. So he busted loose and went."

"He gets restless about every so often," Red-whiskers says, "and goes on a little spree like this. But he wouldn't hurt nobody."

"Thanks, gents," the second gent says, "for helping us find him. Come on, Jumbo."

They ride into the timber with Jumbo shuffling along behind, his drag chain jingling musical, a happy look on his face like a little kid who has lost and found his mamma.

Forgetful Finnegan unlocks the door and comes out. "Don't believe that elephant was quite as big as I thought he was," he mumbles apologetic. "Reckon I kinda forgot how he—"

At that moment, Jessie climbs out of the water tank and gives himself a shake. The water flies every which way,

splattering muchly on Dreadful Drew, who opens his eyes and sets up dizzy.

"Where am I?" he asks faint.

Before anyone answers, who should come running out of the timber, wagging his tail joyous, but Shoe-on's hound, Patricia. Following him is Mrs. Finnegan, heavy-footed as usual.

Seeing her, Forgetful's mouth falls open. "Zenia," he says husky, "I'd about give up hope of ever seein' you again."

"I wouldn't know why," she says snappish. "I told you I was going over to see my sister's new baby and would be back today." She turns to Shoe-on Sorby. "Shoe-on," she says, "I brought your hound back. The critter followed me to my sister's, and I couldn't make him go home. Guess I'll have to stop feeding him when he comes to our place for—"

"Dad-burnit!" a voice cuts in. "Shoe-on, where are yuh, you dad-blasted, sleep-walkin', no-account—"

STILL somewhat dazed, we turn slightly and see Pop Pully hobbling around the corner of the house, his shotgun ready for business and the cornknife swinging against his hip.

"Haw!" he says, spitting gushy. "There's the varmit!"

I realize the varmit Pop is referring to is not Shoe-on, but Jessie, who is standing by the water tank, head hanging, tail drooping, like he is no-little ashamed of himself; or has a bad headache, or both. Pop turns and sees us by the cabin, and his eyes fix on Shoe-on utmostly wrathful.

"Shoe-on," he says, "twice that mule of yourn has come to my place an' helped hisself to the corn mash I dumped out. Now, I don't object to him eatin' the mash, it is the way he acts after he has et it that irritates me no little."

"Such as, Pop?" Shoe-on asks feeble.

"First time, he tried to climb my apple tree and busted off a dozen limbs. About a hour ago, he tried to jump over my chicken house an' busted a hole in the roof. Shoe-on, if you don't keep him home, I'm—hey, ain't that my ole neighbor, Dreadful Drew, setting by the water trough? Thought he was goin' to be hung?"

"Likely is," Boo Boo says, grabbing Pop's cornknife, whacking off a piece of a old lariat hanging by the door and heading for Dreadful, who is still shaking his head dizzified.

"Hey," Pop yells, "give me back my knife. They's a elephant runnin' loose, so the circus men told me, an' I don't want to end up in Doc Porter's office like Shoe-on with a—"

"Avast, yuh lubber!" Boo Boo says harsh. Then, somewhat unenthusiastic, "Ship ahoy! Fifteen men on a dead man's—" His voice trails off completely. Sighing heavy, he goes over to the tank and ties Dreadful Drew hand and foot.

It is along toward sundown, and Boo Boo and I are setting in the jail office, resting and gazing thoughtful upon the cell door behind which Dreadful Drew is safely locked.

"Boo Boo," I say, "aren't you going to finish reading your book about pirates and buried treasure?"

He gives his fat thumbs a slow twiddle and turns somewhat sad and weary eyes upon me.

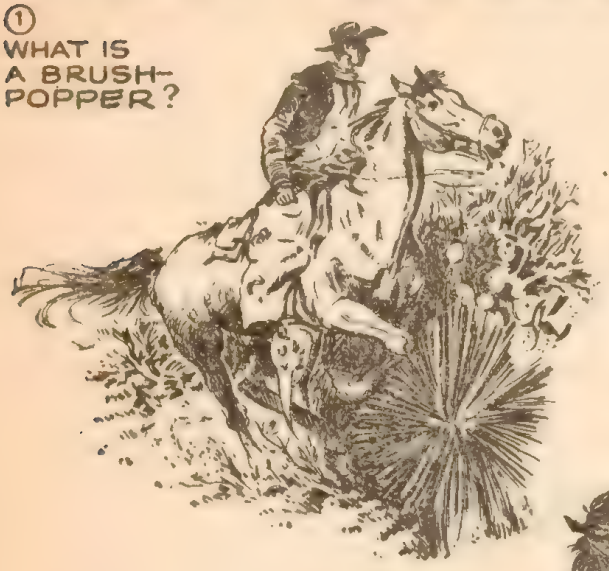
"No, Deputy," he says, shaking his head. "To a gent such as I, who has in a few brief hours encountered a disappearing woman, a elephant on the loose, a mule intoxicated on corn mash and a desperado with murder in his eyes, a book about pirates and such has lost all fascination. Fifteen gents on a dead man's chest; yo, ho ho and a bottle of forty-rod—phooey! Leave me add that I utmostly hope that tomorrow is a peaceful and restful day."

I glance out the window and see the setting sun shining very pretty on a circus poster, showing Jumbo, the biggest elephant in captivity, and a slight chill runs along my spine.

"Phooey, also!" I say vehement, for I, too, have had enough excitement and adventure to last me a long time without going to a circus tomorrow, and no mistake!

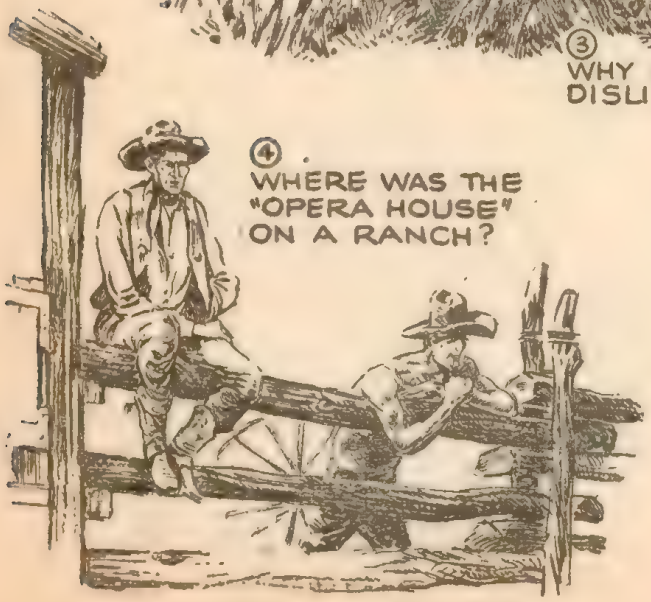
COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

① WHAT IS A BRUSH-POPPER?



② IF A ROPER TOOK A "DOLLY WELTER" WOULD HE BE ROPING A GIRL?

③ WHY DID THE COWBOY DISLIKE MARES?



④ WHERE WAS THE "OPERA HOUSE" ON A RANCH?

⑤ WHAT HAPPENED TO A COWBOY WHO WAS SET DOWN?

The answers are on page 146—if you MUST look!

HERDS ALONG the

It's on to New Mexico for ex-Confederate Bob Hunter and his kin—with raiding Apaches and vengeful foes to fight every step of the way!

As Luttie's rifle cracked, the Indian brought down his knife

DANGER TRAIL

a novelet by REEVE WALKER

CHAPTER I

Grasping Neighbor

THE MAN in the tattered, sun-bleached Confederate uniform plodded down the muddy road weaving with weariness. He did not turn aside for rock or puddle although water spurted from his broken boots and his toes were exposed. To the children who watched him from the shelter of the chinquapin trees, he was irresistibly comic.

Chad whispered to his twin, "He's a ole scarecrow, walked out of somebody's corn patch!"

Cherry clapped her hands over her mouth but some of the giggles got away. The man stopped and looked around. Then he walked slowly toward the children.

Chad stared, a little frightened as the man leaned against the tumbled stake fence and smiled at the five-year-olds. The stranger's eyes burned dark in his gaunt face, but his mouth was gentle above the grizzled beard. He reached out to tweek the silky forelock that dropped across the little boy's forehead.

"What might your name be, sprout?" he asked.

"Chad," the boy answered.

"Chad Hunter?" the man asked sharply. "That's your twin sister, Cherry?"

"Sure," the boy said. "How did you know, mister?"

The man did not answer the question. "You're a far piece from home, sonny."

"No, we're not," Chad said. "We live in that old house up the road." Chad decided he liked this bearded stranger. "Why don't you come home with us, mister? The roof leaks something fierce, but it ain't as wet as bein' out in the rain."

"We'll go as soon as our old dog comes back." Cherry joined the two at the fence. "If he catches a rabbit, we could have something for supper besides mush and turnips." Cherry looked shyly at the man. "Melly might maybe ask you to draw up a chair and eat supper, mister."

"He's comin' now," Chad interrupted. Running to meet the black and tan hound, he took charge of the rabbit the gaunt animal surrendered. "It's a big ole rabbit!" he shouted happily, coming back.

The dog saw the stranger then and his crest rose. Stiff legged, he approached cautiously.

The man snapped his fingers. "Good dog, Ring, good dog!" He moved toward the animal. "Don't you know me either?"

AS HIS nostrils tasted the scent of the stranger, the dog trembled and whimpered. Then he sprang at the man, yelping and frisking in incredulous joy. The stranger caught the hound in his arms and leaned his forehead against the dog's grizzled muzzle. When he looked up again, his eyes were bright with tears.

Chad stared at the two. "Ring won't have nothin' to do with strangers," he said uncertainly. "How'd you know his name, mister?"

"I'm not a stranger, sonny. And I gave Ring his name so I should know it."

Chad backed up a step or two and caught his sister's hand. "Who are you, mister?"

Instead of answering, the man asked a question himself. "How's your mother, sonny?" He waited, fearful of the answer.

"She's all right," Chad said. "But plumb wore down scratchin' to make a livin' out of a few sorry acres."

"A few sorry acres?" the man repeated. "What happened to the ranch?"

"I don't rightly know, mister. I was mighty little then," Chad spoke from the eminence of his five years. "First off, Mr. Slocum brought the news that our pa was shut up in a Yankee prison somewheres. Then he kept comin' back, but our ma wouldn't sit and visit with him and he got mad about something. Then he came back with a paper. Ma cried, but Mr. Slocum said the river belonged to him. Then we moved."

"He took the river range so you were shut away from the water?" The man's hands closed on the dog's scruff until Ring twisted and whimpered with pain. "The dirty, double-crossin' skunk!" The man's voice was too low for the children to hear his words.

"Last month the Indians stole our cows," Cherry said, not wanting to be left out of the conversation.

"*Indians!* There's been no hostiles around here for years!"

Chad was puzzzled by the word. "Hostiles? Ma said they was Comanches."

The stranger's dark eyes flickered with apprehension. Comanches! Who worked with some betraying neighbor. The raiders struck like lightning, killed and tortured, burned out the homestead, drove the herds to one of the Comanchero *rendezvous*. There the herd changed hands for a few dollars and disappeared into New Mexico territory. And one of your neighbors, somebody you passed the time of day with, would pocket blood stained money, his share of death and betrayal.

"The Comanches." The man could scarcely force words through the tightness of his throat. "Did they—"

In his mind he saw smoke blackened ruins of what had once been a home—sprawling, horribly still figures bristling with feathers like nightmare birds—fluttering tags of calico caught on the chaparral that told mutely of women and children carried into captivity and slavery.

"Ring, he barked and barked. Then Dicey, she made us get up and go in the cellar." Cherry's eyes were wide with remembered fear. "It was dark and awful scary. Dicey held Ring's mouth shut when we heard them walkin' around in the house."

"It was awful hot in the cellar when the Indians set the house alight," Chad helped out on the story. "Dicey said it was the Lord, His Blessing that the cellar door didn't catch fire and that our grandpa built the cellar with a dirt roof for just such a reason!"

"Everyone—is safe?"

Chad nodded. "We got awful hungry and it was hard to get the cellar door open after all that burned stuff fell on it, but we got out."

The man rubbed a trembling hand across his eyes and his long-held breath expelled in a ragged sigh.

Chad shifted the weight of the rabbit and changed the subject. "You didn't tell how you knew Ring's name, mister. Nor mine and Cherry's."

Cherry started giggling again. "He's a smart ole scarecrow, that's how he knew! Come on, Mister Scarecrow, let's go home." The little girl put her hand confidently in the man's fist.

"All right, let's go home," the man said wearily. "If there is a home for a scarecrow." His smile was grim. "A near-broke scarecrow, with a limp that'll never let him forget the Battle of the Wilderness, and neighbors that steal his range." Some of the grimness left his face as he looked down at the children. "Maybe we'll have to build a new nest for the scarecrow and the little scarecrows!"

Without understanding, the children laughed. Rob Hunter, home again after four years of fighting in the Confederacy's lost cause, took the hands of the twins he had not seen since their babyhood, and whistled to his old dog. Then they walked down the muddy lane toward a weather-bleached farmhouse where a wisp of

lavender smoke from the chimney climbed the gray evening sky.

IT WAS late when the rabbit reached the scrubbed pine table in the kitchen, so late because of Rob Hunter's homecoming that the twins fell asleep over their polished plates. Rob took them into his lap in the creaking old rocker beside the fire. Carefully, he reached to the cup of bitter coffee that Melodie had placed at his elbow. The few, precious berries that had been saved for the great occasion had a moldy taste, but he drank the brew and smacked his lips over it.

He could say with truth, "First coffee in so long I've plumb forgot how it ought to taste, We had parched sweet potato for a while, till that ran out, too."

Melodie's blue eyes were pitying as she looked at her father. The thinness of her seventeen-year-old body that should have been round with womanhood and the sharp planes of her pretty face were silent witnesses that she too knew what semi-starvation meant.

She touched her father's hand. "Was it awful, Paw? In prison, I mean? Mr. Henry Slocum told us—"

Rob smiled grimly at his daughter. "Well, I lived through it. Plenty others didn't." He rocked creakingly, staring into the purring fire. "So Henry Slocum brought you the news?"

His wife came to the fire then turning down her sleeves after the dish washing and fastening the wristbands. "He said you were as good as dead, Rob."

"That all he said?" the man asked mildly.

Lutie Hunter did not reply in words, but the long look that passed between husband and wife told of advances made and scornfully rejected. Lutie was a beautiful woman still although the long years of privation had set wings of white in her black hair and pared her tall body to its bones. But her resolute eyes had not changed. They gleamed blue and intense from shadowy sockets in her thin face.

Jeff Davis, the thirteen-year-old, spoke up then. "All the time under foot, he was. Talkin' slicker'n goose grease, the dirty ole—"

"Jeff," said the mother.

"Henry Slocum and me was boys together," Rob Hunter told his son. "I reckon he ain't changed none since I saw him last, but out of respect for your mother and your sister, us men had better keep to ourselves what we really think of Henry. Funny thing, nobody ever called him Hank, not even when he was a nipper. That kinda tells about him. How'd he get hold of the river land, Lutie?"

"He said all you had were range rights and a new law had changed things. He bought the land from the state house men."

"All legal and bindin' as the Ten Commandments," Rob said. "I know Henry. He ain't no kind of a fighter, though. A little gun smoke in his eyes might make him see things in a different light."

"No, Rob, no!" Lutie caught at her husband's hands with intense fingers.

"I've had years of waiting, afraid every knock on the door, every hoof on the road brought bad news. I couldn't face a lifetime of that. You know how it would be. Henry Slocum has money to hire murder. Neighbor against neighbor, shooting from ambush, children dead in burned houses." Lutie Hunter's arm tightened around the thin bristling shoulders of her son.

"What are we goin' to do then?" Rob asked harshly. "I've had enough of starvin' to death by inches. Without the

river range we can't ranch and we can't get the land back without a fight."

Jeff Davis Hunter straightened his shoulders and excitedly entered the conversation of his elders. Hadn't his father just said "us men"? "We could go West, Paw! There's free land in the Pecos Valley and grass, belly-high to a horse."

Rob Hunter's eyes turned to his son, sparked with a sudden interest. "The Pecos Valley? That's in New Mexico Territory, ain't it? How'd you hear about that, boy?"

Jeff Davis looked sidelong at his sister. "Well, John Henry Slocum came awhile back. He's stationed at Fort Stanton—that's by the Hondo River and it runs into the Pecos—and he said that was great cattle country."

"Hmmn. What else did John Henry say?"

"Nothing," Melodie said sharply. "He didn't get the chance. I sent him packing! Coming here, and him a captain in the Union army. And he wasn't wearing his uniform either, the sneaky thing. After his father practically stole our ranch!"

"Like father, like son," Rob Hunter muttered, looking from the angry flush on his daughter's pretty face to the wry distaste on his wife's. "I got to admire the Slocum taste—the dirty dogs."

Dicey came in from the lean-to bedroom then. "Lemme have them twins, Mistah Rob, 'fore they pulls yore arms loose at the shoulders."

Rob surrendered the limply sleeping Chad and Cherry to her strong grasp. Idly he asked the old woman, "Would you go along, if we moved West, Dicey?"

"I don't reckon I'd go back on my raisin', Mistah Rob. Yore paw brung me here from Georgia, and wherever the family goes, I goes, too."

"Far West, Dicey . . . Indian country . . . Apaches."

"Ain't no 'Pache goin' to want Dicey's ole gray wool! What kinda scalp would that make?" Cackling with laughter at her own joke, Dicey carried the twins off to their corn shuck beds.

CHAPTER II

Westward Journey

NEXT day, Rob Hunter watched the bank president in the county seat town fidget with the blotter on his roll-top desk. If he could make John understand that he had to have the money! But it wouldn't make any difference.

"Never mind thinkin' up excuses, John," Rob said, his voice as hopeless as his face. "I ought to have known better, knowin' that Henry Slocum owns this bank and everybody in it."

"I wouldn't dare, Rob. I've got a family. If a hundred dollars from me personally would help—" John Camden watched his pen describe small accurate circles on the blotter.

"I'm not broke—not quite." Rob flipped up and caught the lone five-dollar gold piece that his pockets contained. The gold piece that he had saved by walking the last seventy-five miles home. "It's that I have to have money to make a new start."

John Camden's eyes slid over his shoulder to tell him that Henry Slocum had come in and was standing behind him. He turned slowly, knowing that guilty conscience often made a quick trigger finger. But Henry was no fighter.

"Hello, Henry," he drawled. "Glad to see me? And maybe surprised?"

Henry Slocum's long sly face turned the yellow gray of a Brazos River catfish. His thin lips turned up in a catlike grimace, half-smile, half snarl. Held in front of his striped waistcoat, his hands washed and washed against each other.

Rob was filled with a sudden surging compulsion to stamp on the man for the noxious insect that he was. Grabbing a handful of starched shirt front, he lifted Slocum to his tiptoes so that his collar choked him. The yellow-gray face began to suffuse with a dull crimson and the pale

eyes flickered with fear.

The words that gritted from between Rob Hunter's teeth surprised even himself. "I couldn't live in the same country with you, Henry, without killing you sooner or later. But you owe me something and instead of takin' it out of your yellow hide, I'm goin' to take it out of your pocket where it'll hurt worse. You're goin' to furnish me with a new start, Henry. I'm goin' down to your store and stock up for a long drive. Then I'm goin' on your ranch—the part that used to be mine—and gather me a trail herd in place of the Rockin' H cattle you helped the Comanches run off, Henry."

It was plain to read in Henry Slocum's suddenly sweating face that Rob's shot in the dark had hit the target. The man's fright was as good as a confession. John Camden saw it, too. It was just the careful kind of plan Henry Slocum would make. Steal the water, sell the cattle to the *Comancheros,* then marry the starving wife. Rob knew, too, that his unexpected return would necessitate another step—a shot from ambush.

"You've got no proof. You shouldn't say such things! It's slanderous." Henry Slocum's voice babbled on.

Rob looked at John Camden. "I don't need any proof, Henry. And with John to witness, I warn you not to let anything happen to me! Tell your hands to expect me."

"I'll—" the man gulped for air— "I'll tell them."

Rob loosened the choking grip and let Henry Slocum drop back to his heels. "I thought you might be willin' to go along," he said contemptuously.

As he walked out of the bank, Rob could feel the man's eyes boring at his back and could visualize the frustrated hate that blazed in their depths. Rob thought he'd be careful to stay away from lighted windows from now on, in spite of having warned Henry.

Rob Hunter took a last look to see if all was ready. He had half lifted his arm in signal to his wife on the wagon seat when Cherry came breathlessly around the corner of the farmhouse.

"Come on, young un; we're ready to start," he called in vexation.

"I have to put a posey on my dolly's grave," Cherry told him. "You wouldn't want me to go far away and leave my own child's grave with no flowers, would you?"

With Cherry's wide blue eyes questioning him, Rob could only nod. The little girl hurried to place the drooping flowers on the mound where a broken doll had been buried. She must have picked the blooms from the left behind pot plants, Rob thought, looking at the light snow that covered the ground. As he waited, he looked at the small rocker forlorn on the old house. At the last minute, he had found no place for it in the wagon.

"Looks almost human sittin' there," he said, thinking that the little chair was a symbol of what had been a safe and happy way of life—that would be left behind them, too.

Lutie's face was still and expressionless. "That was my mother's sewing chair," she said, as Cherry came running to climb in over the wheel.

On an impulse Rob rode into the yard again and leaning from the saddle caught up the small rocker. "Guess we can tie it on somewhere," he said gruffly. He thought of his brand, the Rocking H, that was often called the Rocking Chair. "We'll take that chair along and build a home around it in New Mexico Territory," he said, cheerful again. "Put a rafter over the Rockin' Chair!"

He lifted the chair up to Dicey who sat wedged between boxes and bundles in the wagon bed. "Doan' know where hit's goin' to go," she grumbled. "Lessen I holds hit in my lap all the way to 'Pache country." Her eyes rolled as she stared at the bright spot of color on the doll's grave. "T'ain't no kinda luck startin' off mixed up with graves."

Rob Hunter lifted his arm in the delayed signal for the start. Lutie clucked to the team and slapped them with the lines. Jeff Davis and Melodie, looking

like another boy in her levis, started the small herd of cattle. At their heels traveled the little band of sheep that were Lutie's special pets under the charge of old Ring, the hound. When they got under way, Jeff Davis would drop back to the drag and Rob would scout ahead of the wagon to mark out the easiest traveling.

Rob set his jaw tighter as he rode, trying to believe that the trail led to a new home and a greater opportunity, rather than to death and danger. He shut his mind resolutely to any thought of a small, flower marked grave.

As the wagon rolled, Cherry and Chad made a chant out of Rob's words to their mother and the team stepped ahead to their sing-song:

Put a rafter over the Rockin' Chair,
A rafter over the Rockin' Chair . . .

Traveling slowly westward, Rob sometimes thought that time stood still. Day after day they crept across the endless flatness of the high plains, the only moving thing in a vast emptiness enclosed by the gray-blue bowl of the sky. The perpetual wind whipped the dry grass and blew ripple marks on the heavy snow patches of late winter as they went. The wind's keenness searched through coats and reddened skin and lips to a chapped and painful roughness, and the light from a world that seemed nine-tenths sky made the eyes bloodshot and weary.

After they turned from the Pecos to the mountains the cold increased in the higher country. As they climbed slowly toward the dim, far-off ramparts of the mountains, Rob blessed the cold and wind that made the long days tedious and miserable. The cold kept the Indians beside their fires. Since travel up the Pecos and across the Sacramento mountains to Fort Stanton did not commonly begin until springtime, Apaches would not lurk beside the snowy trails. Rob had counted on that to insure the safety of his small caravan.

But one day the wind was warm and the following day the weather grew mild. Snow beside the trail melted in the sun and the grass began to show a change of tint that was a forecast of "greening up." Rob searched the horizon anxiously as they crept slowly toward the hills that seemed suspended in the bright blue sky, hills that seemed no nearer despite the slow miles that rolled under wheels and hoofs.

Baldy Mountain lifting a snowy crown was the landmark that showed them their way into the twisting looping valley of the Hondo, past the strongholds of the Mescalero Apaches to the gates of Fort Stanton. Rob twisted in his saddle to search the sky for smoke signals that would tell that Indian scouts had seen them.

Lutie thought he examined the heavy gray-green clouds that began to blot out the blue ahead of them. She wondered if the rising wind would bring thunder and the strange, billowing clouds of dust that the cowboys called "New Mexico rain." She drew closer the shawl that covered her shoulders and leaned out to call to him.

"Shall I pull up, Rob? Do you think this will be a bad storm?"

She stopped to stare at the small pelting objects that began to fall around them. It was hail. She huddled into her shawl and ducked back under the canvas wagon top.

AS THEY watched, the pelting particles grew incredibly in size and number. The stones drummed on the canvas of the wagon; belabored the frightened, plunging animals; smacked against the hunched riders. Hail stones as big as marbles! Then as big as plums! Some few even as big as eggs!

Snorting, bellowing and bleating, the animals plunged and ran in an attempt to escape the pelting stones. In the confusion and stampeding terror, Rob caught a glimpse of Lutie half standing in the wagon as she threw her strength into the reins to control the running team. The careening wagon dipped and swayed dangerously, then rocked off at right angles to the trail into a shallow draw. The team began to slow in the heavy gravel fan

that rushing water had brought down from the hills. When a wagon wheel wedged between two boulders, Rob turned his horse from the pursuit. Lutie was safe there and he must try to save the herd.

If the cattle scattered far, he would not dare wait to gather them again. There had been dim fires on both sides of the trail last night, far away to be sure, but surely Apaches. Pushing on to Fort Stanton with all speed was their only hope.

Coming up with the cattle, Rob yelled and pressed as close to the tossing horns and pounding hoofs as he dared. If he could turn them . . . He saw Jeff Davis on the far side, yelling and flapping his hat, voice and movement nearly lost in the bedlam of sound and motion. Rob hoped that Melodie was safely far behind.

Were the lead steers turning? Turning away from the deepening draw toward the level prairie? Then Rob shook his head in bewilderment. He saw a running river of cattle on his right. His herd had been turning to the *left*. Another running herd poured out to catch him between two crazy rivers of beef. Melodie was behind him, where the herds would meet! *Melodie!*

Rob fought his horse but that wise animal knew better than to run against the tide of bellowing cattle. Helpless as a man in a nightmare, Rob was carried along. Mercifully his herd began to turn —more and more. Jeff Davis tore past, hazing the cattle into a wide circle that would slow down and mill. Rob wrenched his horse around, sweating with fear. If Melodie's horse had tripped, gone down...

But the trampled grama grass showed no dark, horribly still heap that had been a girl and a horse. Rob's breath expelled in a ragged sigh that was a prayer of thanks. Melodie had not fallen. In a diminuendo of sound the other herd racketed into a bawling, clashing mill. Across the narrow space between the cattle a horeman came, the wind fluttering Melodie's scarf as he held her before him. Her own horse stood uncertainly, then trotted after.

Riding to meet them, Rob stared at the herd that now trampled inside a loose ring of riders, wearing blue coats. Soldiers! Then his eye caught the brand on the nearest steer, leaped incredulously to the ear mark. Surely it must be in truth a nightmare, Rob thought. For the brand was the Rocking H. Here were his cattle that the Comanches had driven out of Texas.

MELODIE'S eyelids were fluttering when the young officer rode up to Rob. "I hope she's all right, sir," he said. "I had to sweep her off her horse and I probably scared her half to death."

"I don't scare that easy." Melodie sat up and lifted her hands to her head. She felt with careful fingers the blue and purple lump her hair had covered. "A hail stone hit me."

"If you had fallen off, Melly . . ." Rob shuddered as he lifted her to his own horse from the young man's reluctant arms. "I thank you, sir."

"Lieutenant Grady Bayliss, sir," the young officer supplied. "Serving under Captain Slocum at Fort Stanton."

"Captain Slocum! John Henry Slocum?" Rob turned to stare at the approaching officer.

"That's me," the captain said jauntily. "How are you, sir? I certainly am surprised to meet you way out here." Snatching off his hat, he bowed to the girl. "Miss Melodie, I trust you weren't discommoded by your peril? If I could have reached you myself . . ." He hesitated and let the pause say that he would have rescued her more neatly than his lieutenant had done.

Grady Bayliss' handsome boyish face grew red.

"Hello, John Henry," Melodie said coldly. "It was probably lucky you couldn't reach me. You used to fall off every time your horse cantered."

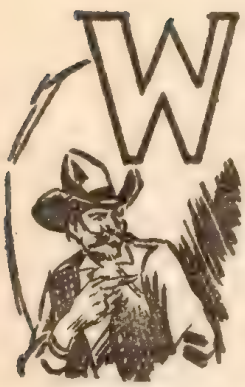
Captain Slocum changed the subject. "Can we help you, Mr. Hunter? Need any help with your cattle? Or an escort? Is someone expecting you out here? My business at the moment is a beef detail

for the reservation but I'll be glad to do anything I can."

"Melly, go see about your mother and the children," Rob said as the lieutenant caught the girl's horse. "Lutie'll be near crazy. You stay here, John Henry. I want a word with you."

CHAPTER III

Apache Attack



WITH narrowed eyes the captain watched as the girl and the lieutenant trotted away toward the tilted wagon and the woman and children who stumbled over the stones toward them. There was sharp impatience in the captain's face and his eyes were cold as he looked back at Rob.

Rob was struck with the resemblance. "You look more like your paw every day, John Henry," he said.

"I hope you didn't keep me here just to tell me that." Captain Slocum twisted in the saddle. "We have to get these cattle to the agent up at Mescalero. Those Apaches do nothing but sit by the fire and stuff their bellies with Uncle Sam's beef, so it takes lots of cattle." The captain's smile was foxlike. "When the agent keeps their paunches full, they don't go raiding off the reservation much. If they'd happen to hear about a small party that wouldn't give them any trouble, they might wipe it out, but mostly they laze around the fires and spend their time gluttonizing."

Rob's eyes narrowed as they held the other's gaze. "That's what I want to talk about. How did my Rockin' Chair steers turn into Indian beef?"

John Henry Slocum blinked. "Your steers?"

"Where did this bunch come from?"

"How would I know?" the captain asked in his turn. "It's not my job to backtrack all the tough beef that comes out of Texas."

"I could ask that young lieutenant."

"He'd better not stick his nose in my affairs again," John Henry said venomously.

"Maybe he's nosin' because somethin' smells." Rob held the other man's gaze and made a long guess. "Maybe you and your paw have a ranch, a handy place to hide out the stuff the 'Comanches' bring from Texas—so you can sell at a cut price to an Indian agent who won't ask any questions."

The flicker at the back of Slocum's light eyes told Rob he was dangerously close to the truth. So did the careful squirm of John Henry's hand toward his side arms. The son wasn't the hard case his father was, Rob thought contemptuously. Henry Slocum wouldn't give away a sure thing by starting gun play at the first accusation.

"Accordin' to what I hear some of the agents buy the same steers three or four times. Nobody pays any mind to agency Indians hollerin' that they ain't gettin' their rations. If they get too hungry and go off the reservation for something to stop the growlin' of their empty bellies, the agent can sick the army on the poor devils and get rid of 'em for good. A dirty business."

As he had foreseen, the truth drove John Henry to action. His hand snaked to his holster. But before he could more than touch it, Rob's gun was leveled on him and Rob's blazing eyes dared him to complete the draw.

"Talk's cheap," Slocum snarled. "You can't prove a thing."

"Settlers' lives are cheap, too, because you and more like you have made the Apaches enemies of anything white," Rob raged. "How did your paw get word to you we was comin' this way? Did he warn you to get any Rockin' Chair beef into Apache paunches quick?"

"You don't dare touch those cattle. It would be stealing from the government."

"Is the pot callin' the kettle a thief?" Rob said in a pretended shock. "I want

no dealin' with your Yankee Government and I doubt anybody would listen to me about your beef shenanigans. But you can remember I know what you're up to."

Rob wheeled his horse and rode toward the wagon. He wondered if it had been wise to guess at John Henry's participation in the notorious government beef frauds. Had he looked back and seen the venomous hate in John Henry's pale eyes he would have known it had been a mistake.

Lutie ran stumbling over the gravel to catch at Rob's stirrup and clutch his knee. "Rob, oh, Rob, I thought you'd all be killed!" she sobbed. "All three of you. You're all right? You're sure you're all right?"

Rob leaned over and lifted her to the saddle before him. Lutie clung to him and they rode without words. Near the wagon, Dicey with a twin clutched in each hand stood watching them come.

"Mistah Rob, hit's the Lord, His blessing that you ain't smashed to a pulp by them crazy cows," she said fervently. "I tole you 'tweren't no kinda luck gettin' mixed up with graves when we was startin'—even a doll baby's grave."

"You said you wasn't scared of Apaches," Rob teased, hoping to lighten the seriousness of the moment. "Now you're scared of a few cows!"

"I ain't scared for me," the old woman said simply. Absently, she smoothed a yellow curl on the back of Cherry's head.

Rob made himself speak cheerfully. "Your face looked longer than Ring's! You can stop worryin' about Indians now. John Henry says they hole up in their tepees in cold weather. We'll be at Fort Stanton before they know we've been through."

"You'd oughta ask that John Henry Slocum to send some soldiers with us," Dicey told him.

The quickly hopeful lift of Lutie's head told Rob of her carefully hidden fears. Rob silently cursed his temper that had led him to infuriate and threaten John Henry. It would be futile to ask him for an escort now—the escort that might bring his family safely to the fort.

The blue coats were getting their herd strung out again. Rob saw the two officers sitting their horses at one side. The distance was too far to hear their voices but it was plain that they disputed. When one turned and spurred toward the wagon the furious gesture of the other made it plain that John Henry had shouted after the young lieutenant, had ordered him back, and that the order had been ignored.

A MOMENT later Grady Bayliss whirled his horse to a halt beside Rob. His eyes found Melodie's face but she was demurely intent on the fingers that plaited and unplaited her horse's mane. Hat in hand the young man bowed to Lutie and then spoke to Rob in a low tone.

"Could I speak to you, sir? Alone?"

Rob walked his horse beside that of the young officer and said: "The captain won't permit you to escort us? Or even give us a soldier?" To Grady's surprised look, Rob grinned wryly. "I'm not surprised, Lieutenant. I knew the Slocums back in Texas."

"Sir, I don't want to alarm you." Grady hesitated and then went on. "You wouldn't be out here if you jumped every time the gras rustled. But I have to be sure you understand the danger. The Indians won't leave the reservation until this beef is all gone, unless they hear somehow that your party is small—easy to cut down. Travel fast to Fort Stanton, sir, and Colonel Roamer will give you an escort there. The captain has threatened to put me under arrest, but say the word and I'll ride with you!"

"And get yourself court-martialed?" Rob asked. "I'm the one at fault, but I thought we'd travel faster, make it through before now. I didn't figure on an early spring." He roused himself and smiled at Grady, "But we didn't come this far to turn back now. We'll push on fast, and thanks for the warning, Lieutenant."

With that the young officer had to be satisfied. He rode back to bow to Lutie and say a pleasant good-by, but he held out his hand to Melodie, his heart in his

handsome face, plain for her to see. After a moment the girl blushed rosy red and laid her fingers in his clasp. He bent, greatly daring, and kissed them. Then he sprang into his saddle and galloped after the already moving column of soldiers and government beef.

"That boy would do to ride the river with," Rob told Melodie with a teasing grin before he turned to the task of getting his little train into motion again.

Melodie stood where Grady had left her, eyes on the straggling column that moved into the glitter of the descending sun. Lutie saw that the girl lifted the fingers that the young man had kissed to her cheek and cherished them there. The mother did not call her to help with the rearrangement of the wagon whose contents were jostled and jumbled into confusion. Let the child have her dream, she thought wearily. That might be all she'd ever have.

The next day and the next passed without incident. Plainly now they were drawing nearer to the great snowy peak of Baldy Mountain. The folded hills grew into mountains and the valleys plunged deeper as they narrowed into canyons. Lutie and Melodie exclaimed a dozen times an hour at the changing beauties of the changing scene. Cherry and Chad kept bright-eyed watch for the rock squirrels that whisked from ledge to juniper and back again and for the darting colonies of rock swallows on the cliffs. Even Dicey said grudgingly that it was right pretty country.

But Rob could not appreciate the lovely valley of the Hondo. The deep, interlocking draws seemed to him perfect for Indian ambuscade; the cheerful noise of the rapid little river was a cover for creeping moccasined feet; the junipers on the heights peered over at the travellers like lurking scouts; the tall stalks of the yuccas charged down the hillside like horsemen brandishing lances. . . . He watched ceaselessly as the faint trail rolled behind hoof and wheel. It could not be many miles now to Fort Stanton.

When the sun dropped behind the mountains and the silver river darkened to an unseen voice Rob relaxed his watchfulness. Apaches did not willingly move at night. To them the dark hours were a time for ghosts and spirits, hours best spent beside a tepee fire.

But he loaded the rifles and the old muzzle-loader double barreled shotgun and looked well to his belt guns when he climbed into the wagon to sleep for a few hours beside Lutie and the sprawled twins. Dicey's snores came from her bed on the ground beneath the front wheels and further back he heard Melodie stir in her sleep. Jeff Davis would ride round the herd for the early trick. Then Rob and Melodie would relieve him.

The boy was visibly growing into a man, Rob thought as he slipped off his suspenders and wrenched at his stiffened boots. Jeff Davis' skinny thirteen-year-old body would have to hurry now to catch up with his man-sized spirit. A man could be proud of a son like him—and a daughter like Melodie. Consciousness fell from Rob like a cast off garment and he slept heavily.

Lutie, waking in the gray half light of early dawn, sat up carefully not to waken Rob and examined the weather. The small circle of gray light seen through the drawn-up canvas began to glow with the rose of the rising sun and the promise of a fine day. Then she heard the rumble and drumming of thunder and saw the oncoming dust cloud. Another New Mexico rain storm!

THE thunder was constant—growing louder. The dust clouds whirled and billowed in shadowy formation. Puzzled, Lutie leaned forward to watch the strange on-coming tempest. Her hand dropped toward Rob's shoulder to waken him.

Then the dust cloud parted, rushed around the wagon in a roar of galloping hoofs, eddied and whirled to show copper faces, drawn bows, flapping buffalo robes that sent the cattle from their bed ground into instant stampede. The thunder burst into heart stopping whoops and the drum-

ming of galloping horses. Indians!

Rob's rifle was in his hands and he was shooting almost before he sat up. Jeff Davis and Melodie! They hadn't wakened him. They were caught up in that screeching death cloud and he was powerless to help them. He could not leave the wagon with Lutie and the twins unprotected. Rob closed his eyes for a bitter moment. Beautiful Melodie, and the boy who was already a man! Tightening his jaw, he shot through the canvas circle, saw the yelling warrior in his sights tumble from his horse.

Lutie handed him the second rifle and began reloading the first. Rob dropped an Indian who had been lifting his arm to fling a handful of blazing grass onto the wagon top. Behind him he heard panting, praying noises that must be Dicey. He thrust the old muzzle loading shotgun back to her, pitched after it powder horn, patch box, bullet pouch. He fired again and another Indian threw up his arms and slipped down out of sight.

"Dicey, guard the twins!" Rob shouted. With two guns in the wagon he could try to reach Jeff Davis and Melly. He spared a glance for his wife's white, set face. "Lutie, stay well back in the wagon and cover me if you can. I'll try to draw their fire. Maybe Jeff Davis and Melly can get in to the wagon."

Rob tried not to believe the two had been swept away in the first moments of attack. He sprang out and over the wagon tongue to the scant protection of a low pile of gear and provision boxes. Lutie's rifle cracked then and he heard the bullet thud into flesh. The Indian had been so close that his dying charge brought his knife down slicing into Rob's shoulder.

But he didn't notice the burn of the wound, for an eddy in the choking smoke and dust showed him Melodie racing for the wagon under the cover of her brother's rifle. Rob sprang up, forgetting his own danger and fired in the interval when Jeff Davis loaded. Arrows hailed around Melodie's flying figure, but she reached the meager safety of the wagon through the whistling flight of death.

Jeff Davis was down on one knee, crawled painfully for a foot or two, and dropped. Rob thrust the rifle into Melodie's hands. "Keep firing!" he yelled.

He covered the deadly yards in a rush, lifted the fainting boy to his feet and began to half-carry, half-drag him toward the wagon. He saw then the whooping warrior who rode at them. Rob straightened his shoulders and stood up to face his death.

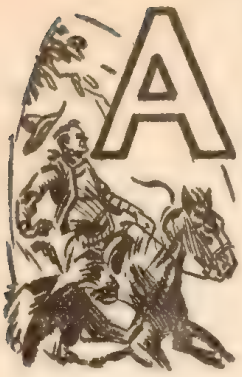
Lutie's shot dropped the horse almost upon them. But the rider bounced to his feet, his face diabolical with hatred. Hatchet flashing, he flung himself at Rob and Jeff Davis. Rob dropped the boy and ducked under the bright steel. He caught the warrior's wrist and braced himself so that the Indian's momentum carried him past. Twisting him over a knee, Rob struck with all his strength at the point of the coppery jaw, then got both hands around the man's throat. He was aware of Melodie coming to aid her brother but he could spare no attention from the writhing enemy under his pressing thumbs. When the Indian sagged, lifeless, to the ground, Rob, too raced for the wagon.

Then he saw that the Indians, finding the defense too hot for them, had turned to driving away the rest of the stock. The cattle were long since gone, stampeded at the beginning of the attack by the whooping and the flourished buffalo robes. Now the raiders were taking the horses. Rob's rage was mixed with futility. They would be helpless, set afoot in this wilderness—if they lived long enough to face that problem.

Three or four Indians dismounted to drive the little band of sheep that were Lutie's pets. Before their eyes, Ring went to a hero's death defending them. The old hound charged the Indians, howling as the first arrow struck him but driven on by his brave heart. Gathering his strength he sprang against the nearest Indian and knocked the man from his feet. A cloud of arrows drove through his body then, but the dog died tearing out the throat of his enemy.

CHAPTER IV

Unexpected Aid



A SOB in her own throat, Lutie pushed back into the wagon, snatching at a bent tin pan and big wooden spoon tucked behind a wooden rib. Before Rob could see what she was doing or stop her, she dropped from the tail gate of the wagon and ran a few yards away. The sheep were her pets, she had raised them by hand. . . . Ring should not die in vain, trying to save them!

Lutie beat vigorously on the pan with the spoon calling at the same time, "Come, Nannie, come Nannie!"

The sheep, hearing their mistress' voice and the call that meant food, plunged and butted at the Indians surrounding them. When one warrior went head over heels, the sheep poured through the hole in the human barricade, running to Lutie. As she led them toward the wagon, the Indians ran, too, to cut off her escape. Rob raced to meet her, loading the rifle and firing as he ran.

He never quite knew how she escaped capture or how they got back to the wagon, hindered as they were by the plunging, milling sheep who clustered about them. Melodie and Jeff Davis, seeing their mother's peril, had dropped back to shoot at the Indians at her heels. As he caught his breath, Rob realized that neither one was shooting so fast. And Dicey? Had she fired the old muzzle loader after the first blast? He could not remember hearing the gun? Were they running out of ammunition?

Rob glanced at Lutie, hoping that she had not noticed the telltale slack in the firing. But Lutie had turned to stony despair, her anguished eyes staring through the front opening of the wagon. Rob whirled as the child's shrill screaming began.

An Indian had pulled heavy old Dicey bodily from the wagon, a twin held in each arm. Rob saw the hatchet descend, saw the Indian tear Cherry from Dicey's clutch, saw Chad elude the man's snatch!

Incredibly, as the warrior sprang away with the child, old Dicey heaved to her feet. Rob saw, then, the horrible hacked wound and the blood that bespattered her white head. But the strong old body and the devoted heart could not die, not while her charge was in peril.

With the deceptive, lumbering speed of a bear Dicey snatched up the old muzzle loader and raced after the Indian. Using the weapon as a club, she beat the warrior down and tore the child from him. Then she turned with her lumbering run back to the wagon. But her steps shortened and her tall old body began to weave and sway.

Rob thrust the rifle again into Jeff Davis' hands and ran toward her. Dicey's eyes had glazed over and her warm chocolate color faded to an ashen gray. As Rob took Cherry from her relaxing arms, she sagged to the ground beside the wagon.

Her eyes gleamed again for a fleeting moment. "Ain't no 'Pache gonna take my chile's purty yella curls," she said forcibly. "Hafta be satisfied with ole Dicey's gray wool. What kinda scalp that gonna make?" The faintest cackle of laughter faded into silence.

Through the tears that blinded him Rob handed Cherry to her mother and straightened the old woman's body. He lifted her apron to cover her face and the horribly drabbled head.

"We'll put her in the wagon," he said, his voice harsh with his effort to control it. He repeated the old woman's words, "Wherever the family goes, she's goin' too."

When he bent to lift the heavy old body, he noticed for the first time that there were other arms assisting him—arms in army blue. Dully, and without much surprise he looked up into Grady Bayliss' face. As they carried Dicey to the wagon, he saw more blue coats and lathered horses. The Indians were gone like smoke

before the wind.

The firelight flickered on Grady's face as he talked to Rob after the scant supper Lutie was able to scrape together. The provisions were nearly exhausted; the horses and cattle were gone; only the sheep remained of the stock with which they had started the journey. Rob felt such a weight of despair that he scarcely attended to the lieutenant's words.

"The Indians were going when we came, sir," Grady Bayliss was saying. "We hastened them along, but you had routed them. An Apache band is seldom large. They can't stand losing as many warriors as they did in this action."

"I can't take any credit," Rob said heavily. "I got the family into this. They got themselves out."

Rob watched Lutie putting the twins to bed and Melodie feeding Jeff Davis who sat propped against the wagon tongue, his bandaged arm in a sling, his eyes intent on the approaching spoon. Grady Bayliss watched them too, but his eyes were oftenest on the smooth curve of Melodie's cheek and on the dark curls clustered at her neck.

"I sent two men to the Fort," Bayliss said then, "to ask the colonel for an ambulance. The women and children—and Dicey's body—can go in it."

Rob nodded, watching the fire, dully wondering what he would do to replace the stolen stock. He had no money to buy more. Then he realized that Grady was talking to him.

"When Indians stampede a herd they leave as many in the brush as they run off," Grady said. "If you had a man to help you—"

"I've got a man," Rob said with a quiet pride as he looked at the boy getting the last bites of his supper. "Jeff Davis and I can gather the strays."

"I could leave you horses," Grady agreed. "I'll have to go with the ambulance."

"Won't be much of a task to do that, will it?" Rob asked.

The young officer flushed but his eyes were direct and honest. "No sir, no task at all! You can trust me to see them safe inside the fort."

Rob said nothing but in the steady look the two exchanged a suitor asked permission to woo his lady and a father gave consent.

"I want to get to the colonel before Captain Slocum does," Grady went on, "or as soon as possible after he tells his part of the tale. That fork-tongued renegade may talk me into a court martial as it is. I can't deny that I refused to obey the orders of a superior officer and I'm absent from my post of duty without official leave." Grady stared into the flames, his young face serious.

"You didn't tell me how you got onto John Henry's deal with the Apaches," Rob said.

"The captain's not what you call an Indian lover," Grady answered. "Soldiers and Indians are natural enemies maybe, but some of us can see that they're interesting people, maybe even suspect that they're getting a poor deal from civilization. But I never saw the captain look twice at any of them except maybe a few young women. So when I heard him giving the agent a lecture about observing customs, I followed him. He went straight to Solomon, one of the war chiefs. That was all I needed to know, after the way he raved about you."

"Were the men willing to risk trouble by coming with you?" Rob asked.

"The captain isn't putting much over on Sergeant McClardy. Sometimes I wonder if the colonel hasn't set Sergeant McClardy to watch Slocum, but I guess not. But the big Irishman thought it was queer the captain didn't give you an escort." Grady laughed. "Anyway you can get Sergeant McClardy to start off for any place by promising him a fight! When he and I tell our story to the colonel, that'll be the end of Captain Slocum."

Rob looked bleakly into the flames. Maybe it would and maybe it wouldn't. The Slocums were clever, slippery devils. He asked, "Did you hear John Henry tell this Solomon there was an unprotected wagon just beggin' to be wiped out?"

"How could I hear him?" Grady looked surprised. "The fact that he went to talk to Solomon at all proved to me that he was up to something. So I pulled out and went hunting McClardy."

"Maybe it would prove to you and me what John Henry was up to, but the one we've got to convince is Colonel Roamer. And I doubt if he finds our 'proof' very convincin'," Rob prophesied.

Next morning, Rob turned to searching for the scattered cattle. In the red barked willows beside the chattering river he caught sight of a few steers and felt more cheerful, believing that he might be able to find others. The horses were gone for good but Grady had said there were sometimes a few to be bought at the fort when the remounts came. He might be able to work out the price of a horse. Starting back to the camp he thought about the wagon. The canvas had been sliced by many arrows, but it would turn some water. If there were some way to get the gear on to the fort. But he couldn't expect the army to send him a team. Without one, he would have to abandon all they couldn't pack on horseback.

Then he saw that the ambulance and soldiers from the fort had arrived as he climbed from the river bank. Lutie had been looking for him and came running as he approached.

"Rob, you'll have to see to Jeff Davis," she began sharply as they met. "I can't do a thing with him."

"Why, I didn't think he was in any shape to give you trouble," Rob said mildly.

"He won't go to the fort with us, Rob. He says he's going to stay and help you. I think he should go where a doctor can look at that arm."

"Seems like that would be best," Rob agreed. "Still, that wound was a clean hole through the top of his arm. I figure he fainted as much from blood and excitement as from hurt, but I won't tell him that."

"*Make* him come with us," Lutie urged.

"Reckon Jeff Davis has earned the right to decide for himself now, Mother. When a boy acts like a man, you have to treat him like a man."

Lutie made an exasperated gesture. "It's bad enough that you're set on staying—risking your life for a few cows."

"They're all we've got in the world, Lutie. Just gettin' safe to the fort won't make us a new start. It'll be hard enough at the best."

Lutie hugged his arm to her side. "I'm sorry, Rob. I don't mean to be unreasonable. I guess it's best that you stay, but I'm so afraid for you." Lutie covered her eyes with her hand and stood still beside him. Then the moment of weakness passed and she dropped her hand to look at him, dry-eyed, faintly smiling. "I won't say any more. It's for you and Jeff Davis to decide. You're the men of the family."

"We'll be safe enough, Lutie. The Indians won't raid again soon for they know there'll be a sharp lookout now. By the time they venture this close to the fort again, we'll have the stray cattle gathered and make out some way to bring in the wagon and the gear." He added lightly, "You be lookin' out for some place where we can light, and put a rafter over the rockin' chair."

So Jeff Davis remained with Rob as the ambulance began its swaying journey to Fort Stanton with Lieutenant Bayliss and Sergeant McClardy's men trotting smartly as a guard. It had been agreed that Dicey's body would be buried at the fort. When they were established they would move her coffin to the new homestead, for Rob was determined the faithful old woman should sleep near the family she had loved and served.

"I'm sure glad you decided to stay with the old man," Rob said with a grin as he and Jeff Davis turned back to the wagon again. "I'd be lonesome as a hoot owl out here by myself. And I'll sure work better knowin' I've got a good lookout with an eye peeled for hostiles."

Jeff Davis's grin widened at the implied compliment. "Sure, I can handle the rifle or one of your guns with one hand and before you know it I can help a little with the work, too. A little scratch like

this won't keep me laid up long." He looked proudly at the bandaged arm he disparaged.

Rob had located a short box canyon that opened to the narrow riverside meadow where he had seen the strays from his herd. A short strip of posts and some kind of gate would hold the cattle there where the water and grazing were good. Then he could try out his plan for bringing in the wagon. He began cutting small pines on the mountain side with Jeff Davis sitting on a rock cradling the rifle and keeping a sharp watch.

By dusk he had several rough posts ready and by noon the next day enough to begin skidding them down the slope to the canyon mouth. That done, he and Jeff Davis riding the two horses Grady had lent them began to comb the willow thickets. They worked slowly, not to alarm the cattle, for it would be difficult for a lone rider to turn them if they ran hard.

Rob's amazement grew as their slow careful drive flushed numbers of cattle from the lush green pastures where the first springtime grass flourished. The total might be more than the Indians had stolen! Evidently stock lost from other raids had drifted to what was surely heaven for range cattle.

Rob thought there might be two hundred head inside the box canyon when he closed the narrow entrance with a brush barrier after the last straggler had gone inside. He would have to change his plans again. He had not expected to find more than ten or twenty at the most of his trail broken stock and had thought that he and the boy could easily handle that many. But two hundred cattle wild as antelope made it another problem. The small leven of tame cattle could not affect such a big lump of wildness.

"Couldn't we leave them there, Paw?" Jeff Davis asked as they talked about their catch. "There's plenty of grass and water and they're no more likely to be found by Indians there than anywhere. When we find our ranch and get some kind of corral built maybe we could hire a hand or so to help us drive them home."

"That's a sound notion," Rob said with a nod. "Of course it's riskin' a sure thing for a long shot. But I'd rather take a chance and start out with two hundred cattle than take our little ten or twenty and go on. After I find me two likely lookin' steers to make into a team, we'll close the gate and come back later."

Jeff Davis looked astonished. "A pair of steers to pull a wagon?"

"Why not? There's not much difference between a steer and a work ox except trainin'. Your grandsire had what he called a spike team on one of the wagons when we came to Texas from Georgia. But they sure don't make fast or smooth travellin'!"

CHAPTER V

New Ranch

DURING the following day they cut out and roped two frisky young steers. Working alone then for fear Jeff Davis might reinjure the rapidly healing wound in his arm, Rob snubbed the cattle to trees and began the attempt to turn them into a team. There was no time to spare for the niceties such as ox yokes or proper harness, so the team was almost impossibly hard to control.

Prudently, Rob unloaded the wagon and detached the arrow riddled canvas before the first attempt to hitch the team to it. When the pair ran away, turning the wagon on its side in a shallow draw, Rob counted himself lucky that the vehicle was not smashed and that he himself had escaped a broken neck. When he tried again to hitch up the steers, they balked as if their stubbornly planted hoofs had taken deep root. When they finally started, they ran away again. Then balked again. Rob sawed at the lines until his arms threatened to drop off at the shoul-

ders. He yanked at stubborn heads until he felt that it would have been less labor to pick up the team and carry them.

But at the next trial the team plodded docilely enough for a few yards, even responded to a tug on the reins. Rob knew it would not be the last of the trouble with them, but a start could be made. Despite his assurances to Lutie, he was not certain the Apaches would not return. So they loaded up and with Rob on the wagon seat and Jeff Davis leading the extra horse, they headed up the valley of the Hondo.

Rob thought they were probably less than fifteen miles south of the fort when they came to a beautiful little meadow beside the river. With the mountain at its back and the stream below for company, the wide grassy shelf was a perfect place for a house. Barns and corrals could stand in the sheltering lee of the mountain. Stopping the wagon, Rob measured the grass with his eyes. It was belly high to a horse, covering the hills with a tawny velvet mantle of stem cured hay.

The place was far enough away from the fort so their life would be independent of the comings and goings of the military but close enough for a refuge in time of danger. Rob looked out across the vista of interlocking valleys and tumbled peaks. Here a man could build a home that he might come to love as much as the old one left behind. He sat, the lines loose in his fingers as the steers snatched at the tall, rich-seeded grass, dreaming about the ranch that could be made.

Jeff Davis rode up, a paper and a scrap of red ribbon in his hand. "Anything wrong. Paw?"

"No, not a thing that I can see," Rob said earnestly. "It looks perfect. I'd like to claim it right now, if I knew what your mother would say. I'm not goin' to ask her to live in a place where she'd be scared to death all the time but I wouldn't like to live right under the walls of the fort either."

"I can tell you what she'd say," Jeff Davis offered, his eyes laughing.

"You can tell?"

"Sure. She likes this place." Jeff Davis held out the scrap of paper.

Rob could see then that the writing on it was Lutie's. "Where'd you get this?"

"As we turned off the trail to come down into this meadow. It was tied to a stick with this piece of ribbon to catch the eye. I reckon it wasn't planted too good and fell over," Jeff Davis said.

Rob read the message:

> Right here, Rob! This is the place to put the rafter over the rocking chair.

HE THRUST the little note into his pocket and grinned at his son. "Light and hitch, boy. Lutie likes folks to do what she says! So we'll locate the new Rockin' Chair Ranch."

After the team and horses were tied in the willows beside the stream—Rob had not forgotten they were only two alone in an Indian country—they set to work. Where the Hondo entered the mountain meadow, and below the *cienega*, a shallow saucer that spread the river water into a lake before it deepened enough to overflow the natural dam, Rob made monuments and wrote location notices. Drained, that miniature swamp would be rich cropland and the waters could be ditched to lower fields.

Range rights would give him the use and possession of the water he preempted and the land on either side as far as the natural divide. But remembering Henry Slocum's legal steal of his Texas range, Rob resolved that the grama grass would not grow under his feet before he tied up the place in accordance with all land laws, both old and new.

Here they could grow crops and vegetables and fruits, do some provisioning (honest) for the fort. So long as there were forts and Indians confined to barren reservations there would be a need for beef (honest beef). It was Indian country, but a man could live at peace with the Apaches, if they respected his ability to take care of his own and if they were dealt with honestly and justly. It was the John Henry Slocums in the background that usually drove them to their deviltry.

As if the thought had evoked the man, Rob saw Captain Slocum on the trail! Jeff Davis wasn't in sight at the moment and Rob himself ducked back of the willows to watch the detail ride on until they rounded the spur of the mountain. They were going away from the fort. What was John Henry up to now?

"I froze, too, when I saw you were stayin' outa sight," Jeff Davis spoke softly at his elbow. "Where do you reckon he'd be goin'?"

"I wish I knew!"

"Nothing out that way but us and the Indians. And it don't look like he'd be goin' out after Indians when he's just back from the Reservation."

Rob looked down the trail with narrowed eyes. "That just leaves us then. I've read John Henry's mind before and I reckon I can do it again. Say he went runnin' to the colonel and the colonel was kinda confused. You can't blame him if he was. Here the Lieutenant comes in, tellin' that the captain is settin' the Indians on a wagon outfit. Then the captain comes and says the lieutenant's a liar and besides deserted his post of duty to chase after a Texas petticoat. So what can the colonel do? Send after me and see what I got to say. And John Henry might think he can manage to get me shot 'resistin' arrest' or 'tryin' to escape.' Jeff Davis, I think we'd better light a shuck to Fort Stanton!"

Which they did immediately. The spike team jogged along with only a fair amount of balks and runaways to bring them in sight of the flag snapping in the mountain breeze above the green of the pines. When they reached the palisade of the fort itself a sentry passed them through the open leaf of the main gate and pointed out the row of officers' quarters where they would find Colonel Roamer.

"Paw," Jeff Davis asked as they waited to see the post commander, "what will the colonel do?"

Rob shrugged his weary shoulders. "I don't know, son. Depends on what kind of a man he turns out to be, I reckon."

Standing in front of the colonel's writing table when they were called in, Rob looked at the man whose verdict would mean that they might stay in the little valley, or that they must move on. Colonel Roamer's eyes were as gray and cold as New England granite, but it was plain that if there would be no mercy in the man, there would be an unyielding and rigid justice. The officer listened to Rob's story. Then seeming to dismiss it, he asked to see Jeff Davis' wound.

Unwinding the strips of cloth he examined the arm with skilled, impersonal fingers. The boy did not flinch although his breath caught a time or two at the pain. Rob felt the familiar surge of pride and knew somehow that the colonel, too, recognized and admired the boy's fortitude.

WAVING for Davis to return to his chair, the colonel reseated himself at his table. The silence grew in the room until Rob heard the buzzing of a fly trapped in a corner of the sunny window. When his eyes were drawn to the insect, he saw through the pane Chad and Cherry playing at the doorstep of a house in the second row of quarters. As he watched them a woman came to the door and spoke to the children, but he could not be sure at the distance that it was Lutie. The colonel's voice brought him around with a jerk.

"You fought with the rebel forces, Mr. Hunter?" the officer asked, his long fingers drumming absently on the table.

Rob was moved to deny it—after all any man could be wearing pieces of an old gray uniform . . . and this man with his outcroppings of New England granite had Abolition written all over him. The colonel might still be glad to put a spoke in a rebel wheel, even in so small a wheel as that of a tattered Texan trying to establish a new home in the wilderness.

Rob drew a deep breath and stood up straighter. "Yes sir, I did. Four year, five months, and twenty-one days—about as long as there was any fightin'."

"Prison?"

"Yes."

"Lieutenant Bayless, in his somewhat incoherent story, said that while you were at the fighting front Captain Slocum's father—acquired—your Texas land?" The Colonel leveled his gray eyes on Rob's face.

"Yes, Captain Slocum's father—acquired—" Rob paused over the word as the officer had done, "my land—legally."

"I lost a son in the war," the Colonel spoke softly almost as if he were talking to himself, "Not killed in battle. Killed by the rotten beef dollar-patriots provided for the Grand Army of the Republic. You have no proof of these accusations against Captain Slocum, Mr. Hunter?"

"None whatever, Colonel."

"Then I can do nothing." The officer's voice was crisp and decided. Then he added, "Officially."

Rob's head snapped up and he looked at the colonel with dawning hope in his eyes. If the colonel believed his story, John Henry Slocum would not dare move openly against them. Knowing that they had the colonel's protection, John Henry would leave them alone, leave them to settle in the little valley below the fort, leave them in peace to put a rafter over the rocking chair.

The colonel spoke again. "Wool is not often pulled over my eyes, Mr. Hunter. I shall advise Captain Slocum that his best interests would be served if he resigned his commission. Then he will be free to give all his attention to his thriving general store and provision business over in Lincoln Town. I feel sure that the captain will take my advice." He got to his feet, signifying that the interview was over.

HESITANTLY, Rob offered his hand. The colonel might not want to shake hands with a Rebel.

Shaking Rob's hand, the colonel said gravely, "I admire a man, sir, who is willing to suffer for his convictions, however mistaken those convictions may be." Then he added, "Keep your family here in the fort until you are able to defend them at your new home. And feel free to call on me for any assistance I may be able to give." With the ghost of a smile, the colonel waved them out.

Jeff Davis pulled at his father's sleeve as they went away. "Will the colonel court martial Grady, Paw?" he whispered. "If he does and Grady has to get out of the army, can Grady come to live with us?"

"I don't think you need worry son, on either county." Rob grinned down at the boy. "Grady won't get court martialed and he might even get promoted. And while he may not come to live with us at the Rockin' Chair Ranch, I figure he'll be under foot considerable. Now let's find the family and tell them the news."

As they crossed the dusty parade ground toward the second row of quarters, Rob knew that everything wasn't settled. There would be new dangers, new disappointments, new troubles on the Rocking Chair, and many of them. Lincoln Town was not far away . . . maybe not far enough away to keep John Henry Slocum's frustrated rage from reaching out to menace them again. Maybe he was looking at the problem with a fool's optimism but Rob felt that he could handle Slocums or Apaches again if need be.

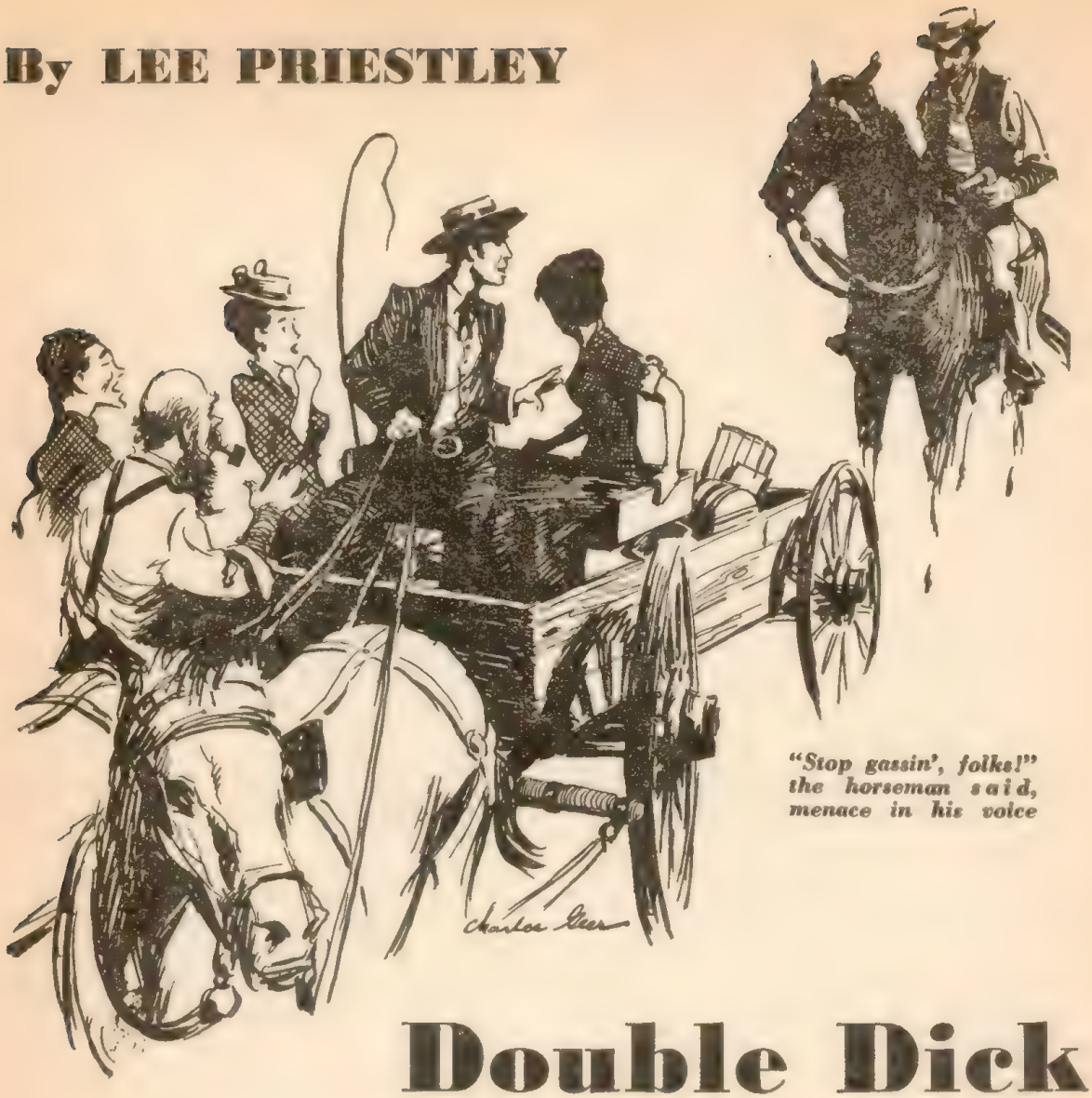
He hugged Lutie to him as she came flying to meet him, and tried to walk with a twin clinging to each leg. He winked at Melodie when he caught her eyes straying to the log palisade where a tall young officer supervised a work detail and laughed aloud when she flushed.

"I'm goin' to sew up your little valley accordin' to every land law there is," he told Lutie happily. "Then we'll start buildin', and put the Rafter over the Rocking Chair.

He bent to kiss her as she clung to his arm and so noticed the brightness of her eyes. "Lutie Hunter, are you cryin'?" he said gently, knowing they were tears of relief and happiness. "When we're on the trail to home at last?"

Lifting his head, he looked out across the mountains, clear and blue and gilded with the last gold of the sun. Out there lay the death and danger trail—the trail that led to the future—a future brave with promise.

By LEE PRIESTLEY



"Stop gassin', folks!" the horseman said, menace in his voice

Double Dick Opens a Cage

DOUBLE DICK RICHARDS leaned back in the barrel chair outside Ching Ling's Chinese Laundry in Desert City, folded his hands over his white beard and closed his eyes. This served both to remove the dullness of Main Street wavering in the late afternoon heat and to encourage the memory of an hour glass figure and silk stockinged ankles.

After his first look at Birdie Ballard and her Beauteous Songbirds—straight from El Paso to the Awful Habit Saloon and Dance Hall in Desert City—Double

The Old Prospector and His Cat Fish for Trouble!

Dick had dropped his plans to go fishing up Catwalk Canyon. Instead, he'd be on the front row for Birdie's first performance. Soon as Ching, the Chinese laundryman, finished his boiled shirt he'd get all duded up.

"We'll show 'em. They's a trot in the old hoss yet," he told the big lynx-gray cat who drowsed on the back of the barrel chair. Double Dick drowsed too, his snoring breath lifting the ends of his mustache.

"Son of ten thousands devils! Harm not a single feather!" Ching, the laundryman, thumped the iron to the board and lapsed into crackling Chinese. He rushed to rescue the blackbird, hanging in a wicker cage at the window above Double Dick's head.

Startled out of his dream, Double Dick saw that Catastrophe, the cat, had penned the bird to the last quarter inch of safety. In one movement, Catastrophe withdrew his p a w s from the cage, dodged a bar of lye soap, and flashed to a point of safety between Double Dick's feet.

"Yellow-eyed demon! Come forth and be slain!" Ching threatened the cat with a scrubbing brush.

"Don't bile over, Bud." Double Dick fended off the Chinese with his heavy cane. "Ain't no harm done. I don't hold with him catchin' birds, but you can't rightly blame a cat for actin' like one."

Muttering, Ching turned back to his work. But he had not turned soon enough. Around the edges of the hot iron, Double Dick's best, and only, boiled shirt turned brown and smoked vilely.

Outraged the old man grasped his cane. Now he couldn't grace the front row. And to make it worse Ten-Per-Cent Peters, the town banker, whose nifty checked trousers awaited the Chinaman's iron on a second board, would be right there eyeing the bosomy Birdie. It was too much.

Ching was agile, but not as fast as Double Dick's cane. It prodded him in the stomach. When the Chinaman doubled over, the old man whacked the stretched seat of his blue pants. Ching leaped, howling and straightening, his pigtail brushing against the iron. Double Dick looped the long braid through the iron handle and tied a quick knot.

"Git that racket outa here," he said severely, propelling the Chinese with a kick. "Sounds like a gaggle of geese!"

Ching went. He clattered down the street with the hot iron pulling his head back until he lo ked and sounded like a coyote baying the moon. Alone in the laundry, Double Dick stared at the burned garment. Last night the durned Chinese had learned him a heathen card game named Fantan. Now, Double Dick thought bitterly, Ching had his shirt, too.

Wadding the ruined garment to protect his hands, he lifted another hot iron from the stove. He set it carefully on the seat of Ten-Per-Cent Peter's nifty checked trousers. Watching acrid curls of smoke begin to rise, he felt better. Then he noticed the wicker bird cage hanging in the window.

He propped the small door open with a match.

When Double Dick went outside, a small burro poked his head from the shade of the cottonwood, ears slanted inquiringly.

The old man motioned him to the dooryard.

"Reckon we'll go on out to Catwalk Canyon now," he said. "The trout might be bitin' and we likely won't be popular around here for a while." Double Dick filled the two flat Mexican canteens from the burro's pack at the water barrel reflecting that the marshal had got almighty touchy over disturbin' the peace. He sighed regretfully. Now he'd miss seein' Birdie do that one, two, three, *kick!* Oh, well, the ruffles on whatcha callems all looked about the same.

He smacked the burro on the rump and turned toward the canyon country, the gray cat bounding beside him. Sniffing the warm sage-scented air like an old mustang returning to his home range, Louble Dick's spirits began to

rise. His cracked old voice broke out in robust, untuneful song:

Only a bird in a gild-dud cage,
A pit-ee-ful sight to see-e-e.

EARLY that morning in the El Paso bank, King Ballard had braced his chin against the folds of his cravat and tightened his jaw hard. What if he broke down and bawled like a baby? The banker wouldn't even talk to him about money unless he brought his mother, Birdie Ballard, along! When he was nineteen and everybody said he looked even older! But he'd half-way expected the banker would refuse him a loan. That was why he'd hired the team and buckboard on the way to the bank—so he could drive to Desert City where his mother was.

How could he face her? He'd never told her about his urge to try the cards. How could he tell her now that he'd signed enough I.O.U's to swallow the ranch? I.O.U's to a Chinaman named Ching Ling in a game called Fantan. That was another reason why he'd hired the team and buckboard to go to Desert City if the bank wouldn't make a loan. The Chinaman lived there. He came to El Paso regularly to gamble and to visit a daughter. He'd humble his pride and maybe the Chinaman would give him time to work out the debt.

Holding his chin so high to keep it from wobbling made King walk blindly. Emerging from the president's office, he jostled a girl. Stumbling himself, he caught her to save her from falling. Then the scent of almond blossoms under his chin made his apology stumble, too.

She was as pretty as a China doll and not much bigger. Blue-black hair like a cap on a proud little head; smooth bangs above black eyes set at the slightest of angles; a skin like cream; a tight dark red dress that fitted her like its petals fit a rose. When her feet were back on the floor again King bent in confusion to scoop up her handbag and its scattered contents. He placed in the open bag a small powder chamois, two carved ivory hairpins, a perfumed handkerchief, a scatter of money, and a letter. The name on the letter stared up at him; *Miss Mei Ling*. Then he noticed the Desert City postmark. Was it possible? Even a China doll would have a father. She was the daughter the Fantan playing Ching Ling came to visit!

The interested sidelong glance she gave him as he straightened made King square his shoulders and tap his hat to a jauntier angle. He was glad he was wearing his guns. His mother didn't like them, but since she was away they swung at his hips. With a forefinger he smoothed the place where he would soon have a mustache.

It was then he caught the movement on the other side of the head-high partition dividing the lobby from the president's office. Over the partition, King saw two men walk up to the nearest window, side by side. Somehow they looked queer. Maybe it was their identical, long mustaches—or that both kept a left hand hooked in a waistband. The outside man screened the other from view by anyone in the lobby. So only King, looking over the partition, and the trembling cashier in the cage could see the gun the outside man drew left-handed and levelled over the apron of the window.

While he stared, King saw the swift transfer of money from inside the grille to a small canvas mail bag. That bandit, too, used his left hand so his body screened his action. The cashier did not go for the gun under the counter. The bandit with the mail sack walked casually away as his partner held the cashier mute and motionless.

The bandit at the cashier's window would have to dodge behind the partition and out the back door to make his getaway. King shoved the girl behind him. His first shot was high. But it caught the bandit in the shoulder, spun him around and twitched his return shot into the front window.

Showering glass fell about the man with the mail sack as he stepped to the board walk outside and pocketed his false mustache. Whirling, he saw his partner go down, heard the instant buzz of voices and pound of feet that the gunfire started. For a second there was no one in sight. But now he could not hope to reach unseen the horse tied behind the bank building.

The board walk pounded like a beaten drum as running feet neared the corner. The bandit doubled the canvas mail sack and shoved it under the hinged cover of the feed box on the back of a buckboard. Then he too ran *toward* the bank as other men rounded the corner.

He met King plunging through the doorway, smoking gun in hand. King didn't even see the small unobtrusive man he shouldered into the safety of the gathering crowd. The street was empty —no dust cloud, no galloping horse.

THEN King noticed that he still clutched the girl's bag. He dropped his gun into its holster and searched the crowd for the girl he had thrust behind the partition. He hoped she had stayed there; such a tiny girl would be lost in the growing crush.

"If you please, I'd like my bag back," said a soft voice at his elbow.

King whirled abruptly. Again he swept the small person from her feet. This time his hands were reluctant to drop away from slim shoulders after he had steadied her. Flustered he handed her the bag.

"It's all there. I mean I put everything back inside," King stammered. "I hope I didn't inconvenience you when I shoved you behind that partition."

"It was no inconvenience to have my life saved," she said. "Those robbers might have shot me."

"Let me drive you home, Miss Mei Ling?" King found the courage to ask. "This is no place for a lady."

Before her lashes dropped, her glance had told him "Yes," but her red mouth said primly, "I'm very sorry; Sister Angelina wouldn't hear of such a thing."

"Are you sure you don't feel faint? Hasn't this commotion been too much for you?" King asked earnestly.

The girl looked at him, one eyebrow raised quizzically. She pressed her fingers to her forehead delicately. "I do feel indisposed," she said. "Perhaps a little fresh air. If you could give me your arm—" Beside her red mouth a dimple flashed distractingly.

King shouldered a way through the crowd with the girl held in the bend of his arm. At the buckboard he lifted her to the seat. As he vaulted up beside her he heard the agitated cluckings of Sister Angelina struggling through the crowd. He did not hear the muttered curses of the small unobtrusive man as the team spun smartly around the Plaza.

But when King slid an arm around the back of the seat, the girl sat away primly. "I think I feel better now. Couldn't we drive back for Sister Angelina? She will be greatly disturbed."

"We'd better drive on—in case you should feel faint again, Miss Mei Ling."

Her black eyes grew round with surprise. "Why, you know my name!"

King grinned. "And I know that someone at Desert City writes you letters."

"My father. He comes often to see me. I should like to go to Desert City." She sighed, "I'm old enough to leave school. It's like being in a tight little cage. But how did you know my name?" Then she remembered the letter. Opening her bag she looked from the letter to his face. Then they laughed together.

The way she looked at him made King feel eight feet tall and encased in shining armor. That was why he hated his plan—the plan that had sprung into his mind when he learned her name. It wouldn't be a real kidnapping. He would only keep Mei Ling out of sight until her father would agree to give him time to work out those I.O.U's.

King turned to the girl, feeling as false as the bandit's crepe whiskers. "You say you'd like to go to Desert City?

I hired this rig to go to that very place! We can be there by sundown. Think how surprised your father will be!"

By the time they'd reached the edge of town King had persuaded her. She didn't know the road. He'd drive past Desert City to Santa Cruz and send word to Ching Ling from there. He settled the team to a traveling gait and smiled at Mei Ling. Her smile in return was a little reluctant and a shade apprehensive, like the first flight of a young bird testing its wings.

Behind them a slouching rider muttered and spat into the gray-brown dust of the road. Then he shifted his weight in the saddle and settled himself to follow the buckboard at a careful distance. He might as well get long gone from El Paso before he started anything.

IN Catwalk Canyon, Double Dick stood well back from the pool of blue water—fish was easy scared critters—and considered trout for his supper. He was in no hurry to decide which arm of the canyon to follow; left toward Santa Cruz, right to El Paso. The road to Santa Cruz began to climb on the high ledge that gave the canyon its name, so it was hard travellin'. But El Paso would be mighty dead with Birdie Ballard out of town. The road entering the canyon from Desert City was empty in the purple evening light. Looked like the marshal wasn't after him hot foot this time. Maybe rump brandin' a Chinaman wasn't even illegal.

Double Dick finished trimming a willow branch and put his knife back in his pocket. "I'll work this pool first," he told the big cat in a loud whisper. Trout have mighty sharp ears.

"If we don't have any luck," he went on, "we'll work the deep water under the Catwalk. But there's likely a old granpappy trout in here will make a good skilletful. Don't you lick your chops, neither," he told the cat sternly. "Wasn't for you and your bird cages I'd be sittin' on a front row watching Birdie Ballard right now. So if you figger to eat, you catch you some frogs!"

Some time later, flat on his lean old stomach waggling the hook under the very nose of a buster, Double Dick heard the rattle of wheels. The big shadowy trout heard them, too, and darted away into the pool. Fuming, the old man propped himself on an elbow and peered around the willow clump at the buckboard coming up the canyon.

Travel dusty as they were, Double Dick thought they were a plum good lookin' pair. The boy, dressed up like a sore thumb in a dudey cravat had a handsome, somehow familiar face. Double Dick wondered if he knew some of the kid's kinfolks. That was one of the biggest nuisances about gettin' a little old. Time you was eighty you'd seen every kind of a face there was, so anybody new reminded you of somebody else. And that sent you rootin' in the rag tags of recollection tryin' to place 'em—like that boy yonder.

The little lady was cute as a girl child's doll baby and not much bigger. Blue-black forelock banged off across her forehead made Double Dick think of a purty little colt. Her big eyes was soft and gentle like a good colt's too. And she looked like somebody he knowed.

The buckboard took the climb that led to the Catwalk on the dizzy ledge. Double Dick flattened himself again and dangled the line. The grasshopper he'd scooped up with his hat oughta look temptin' to that big trout. His sharp old eyes had picked out the swimming shadow that drifted toward the hook when the quiet was broken again.

Double Dick slammed the pole on the bank and sat up. Fishin' spoiled twice in twenty minutes! This was a single rider, a small and dusty man, nothin' special. He was headed for Santa Cruz, too, and he'd come a piece since he'd looked at his saddle last. His horse wasn't reachin' out to amount to nothin'.

As the mounted man took the incline up the Catwalk, Double Dick looked at his hook and line dubiously. That trout

was likely a mile up stream by now. But he spit on the hook and slid it slowly into the water again.

TWO riders this time. Comin' on a high lope from Desert City! Double Dick jerked his line back over his head, so irritated he didn't even notice that his sudden yank had hooked the big trout. Had Ching Ling set the marshal on his trail?

But that certain wasn't the marshal; he looked like a sack of oats in the saddle. This rider curved in and out somethin' remarkable. It was Birdie Ballard! And flapping along behind her, like one of his own clothes lines, was Ching Ling himself!

Double Dick scrambled over to the road. "All the travel in New Mexico has got to go through this canyon when I'm gettin' a good bite!" he said, aggrieved. "Why ain't you in town, gettin' ready for your show?" he asked the woman. "And if you had to take a little *pasear*, couldn't you git nobody to side ye except that shirt-burnin', card-jugglin'—"

"I've known Ching for years," Birdie said, interrupting. "He ran the free lunch counters in half the halls I've danced in. Anyway, he's in this, too. Have you seen them? Have they gone by yet?"

"Have I see who? What's gone by where?"

Birdie Ballard wrung her hands. Double Dick saw that the dust and makeup on her cheeks were streaked with tears. The Chinese, too, was tense as he watched the El Paso road.

"We're only a jump ahead of the sheriff," Birdie moaned. "If we don't get to them first—" She hid her face in her hands and sobbed loudly.

"Stop ridin' all around Robert Hood's Barn!" Double Dick was exasperated. "Who are ye lookin' for, and why?"

"My daughter—her son," the Chinaman said then. "Have they passed here?"

Double Dick snapped his fingers. "That was why they reminded me of somebody else. She looked like you, only her eyebrows wasn't pulled so far back on her forehead; and the boy looked kinda like Birdie. If they was in a buckboard, they went up the Catwalk ten, fifteen minutes ago."

Birdie sawed at her reins. "Help us catch up with them. The telegraph operator tipped me off when the El Paso sheriff wired Sam Clanton to capture my boy. The sheriff—" Birdie sniffed loudly, "said King Ballard had robbed a bank and kidnapped Ching's daughter."

Double Dick shook his head until his beard wagged. "The things a young sprout'll do. If we cut acrost this bend we'd oughta catch up with them. C'mon." He clucked to the burro and led the way down into the canyon.

When they were scrambling over the boulder margin of Clear Creek Double Dick asked a question. "The El Paso sheriff can prove your boy stuck up the bank?"

"All I know," Birdie said distractedly, "is King was in the bank when the robbery took place. The cashier said he shot one bandit and the other one got away with the money. People saw King run out with a smoking gun and drive away fast. So they think he was the second robber."

"Where does the girl figger in?" Double Dick whacked the burro for greater speed.

"The sheriff thinks she saw it all, could testify against King."

DOUBLE DICK snorted, "A ten year old, imitatin' Billy the Kid, woulda had more sense than that." He set the burro at a bank and the others followed, their horses slipping and plunging. "That quiet jasper, him that was trailin' behind them kids," Double Dick said thoughtfully, "does he fit in the picture?" He crossed a small level space. "C'mon now. Lift your nags up this slide and we're on the road agin."

Catching the bridle of Birdie's horse,

he hauled her to the roadway. The Chinese flapping his arms and clucking to his horse clambered after them. As they stood panting and blowing, they heard a jingle of harness and rolling wheels. Then the rig rounded the curve, the horses rearing at the three blocking the roadway.

For a moment no one said anything. Anguish and apprehension on their faces, Birdie and the Chinaman stared at the two in the buckboard. Then they were all together in the road; heads resting on shoulders, hands stroking soft hair, voices saying, "There, there, everything will be all right," or the equivalent of the same words in Chinese.

Double Dick rested his chin in his hand and his elbow on a front wheel of the buckboard. "First we bust a tug gettin' here, then stand around pattin' each other's backs!"

"I knew I was a fool, Mom," King Ballard said rapidly. "I was coming to tell you I'd never gamble again. And I'll pay it all back if it takes me the longest day I live. But I was in the bank and before I hardly knew what I was doing—"

"Stop!" Birdie Ballard said desperately. "Don't say another word! We'll send the money back to the sheriff. You didn't really mean to rob the bank, did you, darling?"

"Send the money to the sheriff?" King was puzzled. "The I.O.U's are made to Ching Ling. . . . *Did you ask me if I meant to rob a bank?*"

"The telegraph said you left town hurriedly and kidnapped Mei Ling because she could be a witness."

King shook his head. "I'm forty kinds of fool, but not the bank-robber kind. Does the sheriff actually—"

Mei Ling spoke up then, indignantly. "They'd better stop saying King robbed their old bank. He was wonderful!" The glance she gave him was another superlative. "He shoved me behind the partition but I came right out and saw it all. King shot one robber and chased another. The cashier just stood there! And he did not kidnap me. I came because he asked me, because I wanted to."

King seized Mei Ling's hands. "I have to tell you, honey. I did have some idea of holding you for ransom—just at first—so I could talk your Pa into trading back my I.O.U's. But I dropped that plan before we'd gone five miles. I'll work out the money I owe him and maybe after that—"

"Why should you both work—and wait?" The girl's cheeks flushed at the boldness of her words.

"I'd work all my life for you," King said softly.

Double Dick smacked his hand on the wheel. "Now I get it. This young sprout played Fantan with Ching Ling. And he got cleaned, too."

"His I.O.U's were torn up within the hour," Ching Ling said coldly. "I do not bankrupt boys. I took them only to give him a needed lesson." The chill went out of the Chinaman's voice and his face softened as he looked from King and his daughter, holding hands in happy oblivion, to Double Dick. "And I thank you," he said.

Double Dick goggled at him. "You don't hold no grudge about the rump brand—about the hot iron?"

"I did think about avenging my scorched spots with a hatchet," Ching Ling grinned evilly, "and there was the additional small matter of an open cage."

"That was kinda spiteful," Double Dick admitted. "The bird was likely better off—safer."

"The blackbird? He flew away, but he came back again." Ching Ling nodded toward his daughter. "Do you think she would be better off and safer in a cage? Keeping her over long at school was like keeping her in a cage. But I needed to be shown that freedom is better than security. I had worried about a marriage for my child. We of an alien race—"

"When the cage door opened, she fixed that right fast, didn't she?" Double Dick beamed at Birdie. "Your boy seems

like a nice young sprout."

"Aren't they sweet!" Birdie beamed in her turn. "They can get married and go out to the ranch and start raising—"

"Stop gassin', folks!"

There was menace in the sharp voice that cut across the talk. The menace was backed by a gun in the left hand of the horseman who had rounded the curve. "I ain't got the time for it. Fork over that mail sack, Bub."

King stared. "Me? Mail sack?"

"Lift the lid on that feed box and hand me back what I put there," the horseman ordered.

DOUBLE DICK was briefly busy as he leaned against the buckboard's front wheel. Then he dropped his knife and a small object into his pocket and looked over King's shoulder as he lifted the feed box lid. He could see a canvas sack folded over bulging contents.

"You're the bank robber! The one that got away!" King shouted, slamming the lid down on the sack.

A bullet kicked up gravel around King's feet and the smack of the explosion echoed across the canyon like a clap of hands. Before the echo could bounce back again, Double Dick's cane had lashed the bandit's gun from his hands and prodded his horse to a flurry of pitching. Striking the road heavily, the robber rolled behind the shelter of rock slabs fallen from the rim to the road. Retrieving his gun, he fired around his barricade.

The narrow roadway was a welter of spurting gravel, plunging horses, flying feet, noise—Birdie and Mei Ling screaming, the bandit's horse galloping away, the crackling curses of the Chinaman. The burro lashed out at the rearing team causing them to warp the buckboard into the cliffside slabs. Double Dick threw himself flat and brought his own Navy Colts into action.

"Git down!" he yelled at the others as he sighted at an edge of movement. "Hit the grit! Bite the dust!" Then he whispered to King, "Take the outside. See if you can git around behind him."

As the boy inched away under cover of the roadside rock, Double Dick settled to keeping the bandit pinned down. He swung a hand violently at Birdie until she managed to flatten another half inch. When a bullet threw stinging sand in his face, Double Dick hugged the road himself.

He grunted with satisfaction when his far sighted eyes saw chips fly from the rocks with his next shots. Dern feller could see how he liked a face full of grit! Double Dick began to follow King along the outside edge of the road, now and then slinging another shot into the marble slabs.

"Hey! He'll see there's no one back there to hold him off!" King's voice was an outraged squawk as the old man hunched beside him. "He'll make a break for it!"

"Bound to try," Double Dick agreed placidly.

King began to surge to his feet. "You letting him get away. Are you in cahoots with him?"

Double Dick clamped a hand around the boy's ankle and pulled him down. "Lay still! You want to spoil everything?"

King sunfished in the old man's grip. "There he goes, like I told you! You made him a present of the rig and the mail sack!"

Bent double, the bandit raced for the buckboard.

The team danced and reared as he sprang into the seat. He cramped the wheels free of the rocks.

"He'll get away!" King yelled leaping to his feet and going for his gun. He turned on Double Dick, "I'd ought to—"

With the lethal cane, Double Dick prodded gently just above King's belt. "You'd oughta not jump into so many conclusions, Bub. That jasper won't git far. Watch—"

The bandit bent over lashing the horses. He sent them leaping into the road past Birdie and Mei Ling. Ten yards—past the Chinaman—fifteen

yards—the outside front wheel wobbled, then ran off the axle.

FOR a long second as the wheel bounded erratically, the buckboard remained upright. Then it crashed down on one side, the axle screaming as it rubbed a bright stream of sparks from the rocky roadbed. The bandit, like the buckboard, seemed suspended in air for a second. Then his dive carried him over the edge of the Catwalk and down into the canyon. A loud splash interrupted Birdie's scream.

"Lucky for him he went over right there," Double Dick said. "It ain't too far down and the water in the pool is medium deep." He fished from his pocket the nut he had removed from the buckboard's front wheel when the bandit had first appeared, and handed it to King. "Here. Won't be much trouble to git that wheel back on, once you find it."

"What if the man can't swim?" Birdie asked tremulously.

"Be a good time for him to learn," Double Dick said. "Or we can go down and fish him out when the fight's soaked outa him."

"You darling old thing!" Birdie beamed at Double Dick. "If it hadn't been for you—I'll never forget this! Never!"

She advanced upon him, arms spread. It came to Double Dick that he was about to be clasped to that famous bosom, maybe even kissed. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and closed his eyes in anticipation.

Catastrophe, the lynx-gray cat, came bounding around the buckboard with the big trout in his mouth—like a pirate carrying a knife between his teeth. Behind him clattered the line and willow pole, still securely hooked to the fish. The pole bounced, dragged, then caught in the wheel of the buckboard. Catastrophe pulled—pulled harder. The line broke. And the willow pole whacked across Birdie's ankles.

At the startled squawk she made, Double Dick's eyes flew open. Birdie teetered on the very edge of the road, her arms flailing like a windmill in a high blow. As he stood rooted in horror, she went over backwards, her desperate clutching hands pulling Ching with her. Like a falling meteor they dropped through the purple evening. Then the screeching was quenched in a splash.

Double Dick passed a trembling hand over his face, the face that had purty near been kissed by Birdie Ballard. Then he whacked the burro and kicked cat and fish behind the closest juniper. The three melted into the dusk before King had made the first leap to rescue the floundering three in the pool below.

Double Dick's cracked old voice lifted above the sounds of splashing:

Only a bird in a gild-dud cage,
A pit-ee-ful sight to see-e-e-e. . . .

INDIANS AND HORSES

WHEN the Indians of New Mexico and Arizona were first attacked by mounted Spaniards in the early sixteenth century they thought that horse and man were one. Later when they found this wasn't so they had no compunction about killing off the troopers when they could but they spared the horses whenever possible. For almost a century the horse was regarded by these Indians as a demigod. A new religious cult might have grown up in this part of the West if the Spaniards hadn't blitzkrieged.

During this interval the Indians made almost no attempt to learn to ride or use the horses in other ways. The animals were permitted to roam free and were thus the ancestors of the great wild herds later captured and utilized by both white man and red.

—*Mark Knight*

From the Horse's Mouth

by JACKSON COLE

You'd be surprised what a roan can see and hear!

I ALWAYS was a bit sorry that my boss ever met "Whiskers" Watson. I have seen lots of humans with ugly faces, judged by my standards of beauty, but Watson looked like some of those ghosts that we horses sometimes see in old stables late at night. We are like most animals, and can see a lot of things that people don't even realize are there.

Watson was an old prospector who spent all his time wandering around the country looking for gold and never finding any. He had a mean face decorated with black whiskers. He didn't even have a burro to take care of him like most sensible old prospectors do —which just goes to show the sort of man he was right from the start.

My name is Buck, and I'm a roan. Of course a roan can be bay, chestnut, red or brown but always with gray or white thickly interspersed. I happen to be a chestnut roan, and with a handsome coat and mane and tail, if I do say so myself.

Matt Miller—that's my boss—raised me from a colt, and he taught me to be a good roping horse and an all around cowpony. I know enough to stand pretty well when my reins are dropped down to the ground. I only buck a little in the early mornings when I'm feeling skittish, and I can run fast and long and don't tire easily.

"Time we were heading out to see more of the country, Buck," Matt told me one morning. "I'm getting a hankering to see what's over the next hill."

I knew what that meant. Matt was about to quit a good job as a cowhand and go riding on, with me doing all the work and him sitting easy-like in the saddle. He is a big dark-haired man, and when he wears his leather chaps and his gunbelts and two guns and all the rest of the clothes and the stuff he carries in his pockets he sure is enough to weigh a horse down. You take a saddle that weighs around forty pounds plus a man who weighs a hundred and eighty, and you know you are carrying

something, even if you are a big horse like I am.

I'll say one thing for Matt, though, before I get around to mentioning a few others: he's a man who knows how to treat a horse right. He rides light in the saddle and doesn't go shifting around so one side of my back gets worn out before the other. Never gets to sawing on the reins or pulling me up so short that the bit hurts my mouth, either.

Anyway, Matt tells the owner of the ranch where we were working that he was quitting and gets his pay. Then he saddles me up and we head out for to see what's over the nearest hill. Personally I never thought much of that saying, for it always meant that I had to climb the hill before Matt and I could see what was on the other side. Usually there was just more hills.

"Sure is a mighty nice day, Buck," Matt said as we headed away from the ranch. "Bright sunlight and blue sky with not a cloud in sight."

I could have told him that as far as I was concerned it was just another morning and that my saddle cinches seemed a little tight. Might be that what with Matt Miller having a string of horses back at the Circle K, he hadn't worked me as much as usual, and I was getting stout around the middle.

WE kept going and around noon we were traveling through a stretch of wild rocky country, when all of a sudden what looks like a scarecrow taking a walk looms up ahead of us. I shied and acted a bit skittish just to express my opinion of the figure ahead.

"Whoa, calm down, Buck," Matt said soothingly. "It's just a man."

I hadn't thought it was a grizzly bear, but then sometimes humans are dumber than anybody, and that includes Matt. I never have learned to talk so people understand me. No matter what pearls of wisdom I try to utter it comes out a whinny or a neigh.

Soon as we got close enough, the scarecrow started to talk. Matt gave a gentle little pull on the reins, so I halted and stood listening.

"Morning, stranger," said the scarecrow through a mouth completely surrounded by black whiskers. "Whiskers Watson is the name, and I'm sure glad to see you. I've been hankering to tell you about it, to tell anybody but I haven't seen a soul for a week."

"I'm Matt Miller," said my boss. "Me and my horse are just drifting, aiming to see as much of the country as possible. There sure is a lot of Texas."

"I know," said Watson. "I've covered most of it on foot, hoping to make a real strike finding gold. Looks like I would be close to doing it if it wasn't for Rain Cloud and the ghosts."

I snorted real soft-like. In my opinion, Whiskers Watson would scare ghosts a lot more than they would frighten him. He sure had a mean and ugly face. He was carrying a rifle but was not wearing any six-gun. He had on a buckskin shirt that was a bit big for him and flapped around when he moved. The old dark trousers he wore fitted him just about as well, and it had been a long time since his old black hat had seen better days.

Matt swung out of the saddle, which was considered the polite thing to do when you were talking to a man standing near your horse. I approved of it, for it gave me a rest from Matt's weight for a while. Matt led me over in the shade of some trees, and Watson tagged right along behind us.

It wasn't the first time that Matt and I had run across prospectors in our travels, but there were a lot of things about Whiskers Watson that puzzled me. The first thing I wanted to know was why he didn't have a burro or even a pack-horse anywhere around. Usually a prospector has to have a burro to carry his supplies and tools for hunting gold, and Watson didn't have any so far as I could see.

"What do you mean by Rain Cloud and the ghosts?" Matt asked.

I pretended to nibble at some grass but I wasn't missing a word. I was just as puzzled as I knew Matt must be.

"Rain Cloud is an Indian who hangs out back in those hills," Watson said, waving one arm toward the south. "Don't know what tribe he belongs to, if any, but I found gold sign there near a big overhanging rock. Before I got a chance to really start digging Rain Cloud shows up and drives me off, claming I was digging up the graves of his ancestors and if I did, the ghosts would come and haunt me."

"Are these graves out in the open?" Matt asked.

"They are," said Watson. "Why?"

"I always heard that most of the Indians in this region buried their dead in caves," said Matt thoughtfully. "And in the branches of trees—not in graves out in the open."

"That's it," said Watson. "I don't believe Rain Cloud is worried about anyone digging up his ancestors. I'll bet he knows there is gold there and is using that stuff about the ghosts to keep people away."

"Might be," said Matt. "I'd kind of like to see the spot where those Indians are supposed to be buried."

"Tell you what," said Watson. "You help me get the gold there and I'll give you a half interest in the claim."

"It's a deal," Matt said.

"Of course we'll need supplies and stuff to get the claim working when we take it over," Watson said slowly. "And I'm plumb broke."

"That's all right," Matt said. "I'm carrying six months' pay in my pocket —close to three hundred dollars. That should keep us going for awhile."

As I listened, I felt like kicking Matt right on the seat of his pants. I was watching Watson and I could see how the eyes in that ugly face started glittering at the mention of money. It was my opinion that Whiskers Watson would kill a man for two dollars if he thought he could get away with it. Sometimes I worry about Matt not even having horse sense.

"Suppose we head back into the hills and look over the spot where the gold is located now," Watson said, seeming eager to get started all of a sudden. "Let's go."

"Suits me," Matt said.

He walked over to where I was standing and picked up the reins and swung into the saddle. Watson started walking ahead of us, heading toward the south. I didn't like him even a little bit, and it was all I could do to keep from running him down.

I noticed we were following what looked like a trail that had been left by the covered wagons when the trains of big Conestogas had brought the first settlers to this part of the country. The things a horse learns if he listens to people talk!

FINALLY we reached a spot near a big overhanging rock. Watson stopped so fast I nearly ran over him. He stood staring at a place where someone had dug open a grave. I could see there were some skeletons in the pit.

"Why that lying sidewinder," Watson said. "He drove me away and then dug open that grave himself. And I believed Rain Cloud's story about guarding his ancestors' graves."

"I suspect you'll find that was the grave of some people traveling with a wagon train," Matt said. "They may have been killed during an Indian attack, and whoever found them buried them alongside the trail."

"Guess you're right," Watson said, looking around uneasily. "I sure would like to know where Rain Cloud is now. He has too good a chance to down us with us not knowing where he is around here. I'm going to go look for him."

"All right," said Matt swinging out of the saddle, and leaving me standing with my reins dragging some distance away from the overhanging rock and the grave. "Go ahead. I'll take a look around."

Whiskers Watson disappeared among

the rocks, carrying his rifle. I watched Matt walk over and look at the grave. His back was toward the overhanging rock. Suddenly an Indian appeared from the shadows beneath the rock. He wore levis and moccasins, but from the waist up he was dressed in nothing but Indian.

Matt whirled, drawing his right hand gun just as Rain Cloud lunged at him holding a wicked looking knife.

The Indian grabbed Matt and kept him from using the gun as they struggled and moved closer to the big rock. Up on top of the rock Whisker Watson appeared, his rifle in his hands.

"Get him, Rain Cloud, he's got money," Watson shouted. "Swing him around so I can put a bullet in his back."

I was scared. It looked like Watson and the Indian were out to kill Matt Miller for the six months' pay he carried, and there wasn't much of anything I could do about it. Even though my reins were dragging and I was supposed to remain ground-hitched, I lifted my head and started edging closer.

"Swing him around, Rain Cloud," Watson shouted again.

The Indian did manage to force Matt around so that his back was toward Watson. The prospector fired without raising his gun all the way to his shoulder, but Matt had been faster. It was Rain Cloud who let out a howl that could be heard for two miles as he got Watson's bullet in his back high up near the shoulder.

Matt had lost his right hand gun just as Watson fired, but his left hand flashed to his holster, and his second Colt came up roaring. The bullet got Watson in the right shoulder and he dropped the rifle, cursing a blue streak. I'm sure glad that horses don't use language like that.

"All right, you grave robbers," Matt said, picking up his other gun and covering Watson and the Indian. "I thought there was something wrong about your story of having discovered gold and the Indian keeping you away from it, Watson. You had to have some excuse for digging open this grave in the hope of finding jewelry and perhaps money on the people buried there."

Some riders appeared. Four cowboys from a near-by ranch who had been hunting strays, had heard the shooting and ridden to see what was wrong. Matt told them what had happened.

"We've seen this bearded hombre and the Indian wandering around out here in the hills," said one of the cowboys. "Wondered what they were doing. Grave robbers, eh? All right, we'll turn them over to the sheriff in town." He grinned. "Don't happen to be looking for a job, do you, Miller? We could use an extra hand in our outfit."

"No thanks," said Matt. "I still got a hankering to see what's over the next hill. So me and my horse Buck will be traveling on."

I sighed as Matt headed for me, aiming to swing into the saddle and get ready to ride. Trouble was some of those hills were pretty steep, and you can believe that, for it comes right from the horse's mouth!

•

Custer Wasn't Scalped

SO HIGH was the regard in which the Sioux and other Indian tribes held General Custer that after his defeat and death at Little Big Horn his was the only corpse that wasn't scalped. The Indians were afraid that the ghost of Yellow Hair might be as formidable as its mortal predecessor.

The two battalions of the Seventh Cavalry wiped out at Little Big Horn had been outnumbered by 20 to one. When Captain Benteen and his relief column arrived they found the ground immediately around General Custer, his flag corporal and a small band of last ditch fighters horse-knee high in Indian corpses. They estimated that more than 100 Indians had been killed by the last knot of eight white men within a radius of about 100 feet.

—Sam Brant

A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

THERE'S something about these mellow spring days, with the grass fresh and green again and the little red, white-faced calves skipping along after their mothers, the lambs bouncing around and the clear call of meadowlarks ringing over the plains that makes a man yearn for the great wide-open spaces. If you can go, get going. If you can't, the next best thing is to grab off one of these rip-snortin' western novels—a magic carpet to God's country. Written by authors who cut their teeth on sagebrush, they'll transport you west a heap faster and cheaper than a train ticket. These are a real bargain at a quarter.

TROUBLE ON THE BORDER by Gordon Young

If you've never met Red Clark before, you're in for a treat. If you're an old cowhand, familiar with the red-headed fighting fool, you know what to expect. Red rides his innocent way into Julio County where he encounters a certain Zachery Jameson Hill, tramp printer and wandering journalist. Hill had an urge to publish an honest newspaper, one that wouldn't cringe before the big wheels of Julio County, one that would do a little muckraking where needed and show up some of the respectable thieves of the community and get a little better break for the small ranchers who were being pushed around.

This kind of attitude in an editor was an open invitation to suicide in a place like Julios County, which Red pointed out to him was known as "plumb bad."

Made no difference, Hill was still willing. And so Red Clark, never one to run from trouble, decided to stick around and back up the new paper with a couple of Colts if need be.

The result is all the action and suspense and excitement that have made the Red Clark books so famous.

•

HELL AND HIGH WATER by William MacLeod Raine

To a girl like Willie May Broderick life had seemed pretty complete. She was engaged to a prominent man, a man with aspirations to the governship of the state. There wasn't a cloud in the sky until she was captured by the outlaws known as the Hickory gang. Then, suddenly, she was transformed from a happy girl to a cringing, terrorized creature cowering before the menacing glares of four rock-hard, brutal outlaws as they debated the time and manner of her death.

At this point their leader rode into camp and it added nothing to Willie May's peace of mind to discover that he was her fiance—Hiram Sugg.

With the mask off, Sugg's dangerous game was revealed. As hidden leader of the Hickory gang he was gambling boldly for power. The governorship was the prize—and a hempen noose the price of failure. But now, with his identity out in the open, Willie May had to be silenced or his plans be smashed. For the girl's love had turned to instant hate at the revelation forced upon her.

There was another fly in the Sugg ointment—Bob Lee a rider for the Brodericks knew too much for comfort as well. And while Sugg prepared to kill the girl he had been going to marry, Bob Lee faced the outlaws with the only argument they understood—lead and flame.

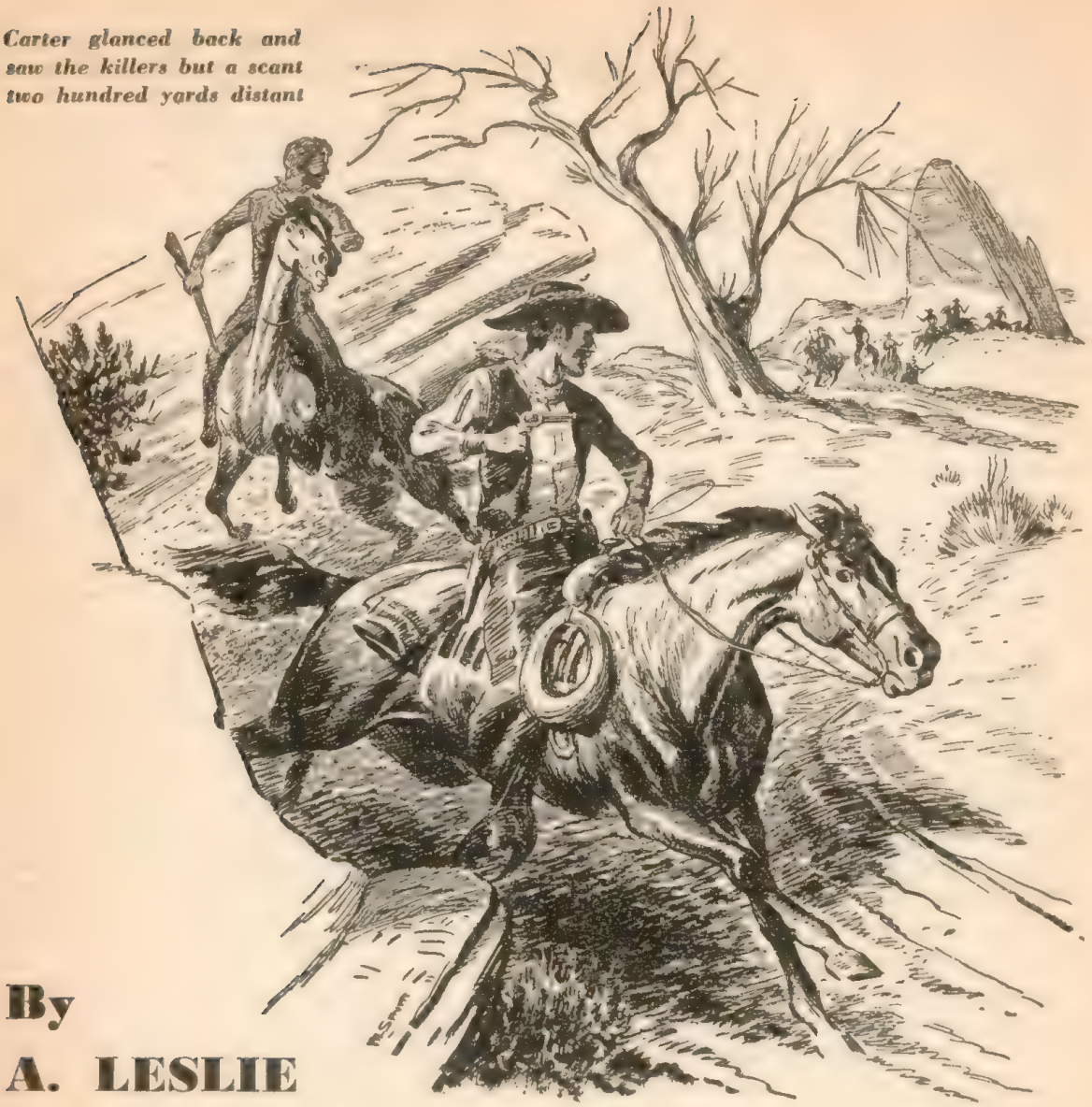
•

BULLET BRAND by Hal G. Evarts

Art Langford would seem to have every right to order Stan Hollister off his ranch—Spanish Acres. But the joker was that Langford didn't really own the ranch at all, it belonged to Hollister, the man being ordered off. But even though the title of the ranch was in dispute, Hollister kept his mouth shut about his claim for a very good reason—becoming the owner of Spanish Acres was a very good way to becoming a corpse. Somebody was systematically wiping out all the owners. And since the one person who seemed to profit by it was Art Langford, Hollister had good reason to suspect him.

But that was before he fell in love with Langford's sister, Sarah Lee, the wild and wilful girl who rode more recklessly than a man, in whose lovely body slumbered unawakened passions.

Hollister loved and wanted her, and so all he had to do to win her was to solve the mystery of Spanish Acres, win Langford over despite his hostility—and find a killer. It'll hold you.



Carter glanced back and saw the killers but a scant two hundred yards distant

By
A. LESLIE

WEASEL BLOOD

The only one who had a good word to say for notorious killer Hunch Gulden was Branch Carter—the man who pursued him. . . .

SOME naturalists hold that a large parasite in its stomach is what drives the weasel to its unbridled ferocity and wanton killing.

If this is true, then, by all analogy, Hunch Gulden must have accommodated a whole flock of free-livers in his insides.

There is no beast of forest, plain or marsh so feared by the host of little folk—the rodents and ground nesting birds—as is the weasel, the terrible little animal with its elongated muscu-

lar body, short powerful legs, and strong thin neck.

The weasel follows like fate wherever its victim may lead. Marmot and woodchuck, gopher and muskrat may seem safe crouching in their snug burrows, but should a weasel appear at the entrance, they are lost. A lightning fast spring and needle-sharp teeth are sunk into the victim's throat. The blood is then sucked out of the collapsed carcass, the brains devoured and the flesh left for the worms and the ants. That is the weasel's way. At times it kills through sheer devilishness, continuing its orgy until all members of a colony of rodents or a coop of chickens are dead.

The weasel knows no fear and will put up a tremendous fight against insurmountable odds. In fact, the only thing to be admired about the fiendish little slayer is its undaunted courage.

Hunch Gulden had all the loveable characteristics of the weasel, only a little more so. And, like the little furred killer of the forest, his one virtue was his utter fearlessness. About the only notion Gulden had of fear was the murky idea of it he got from a dictionary definition. That is, presuming Gulden had ever scanned the pages of a dictionary, which is doubtful.

It is said that Gulden killed his first man with his teeth—literally tore his throat out—he being unarmed and his opponent having a knife. But since then he had killed so many that details of the demise of his first victim were fogged by later atrocities.

GULDEN'S peculiar nickname did not relate to his posture. The vicious little owlhoot's small, slender figure was lance-straight. It came from his method of drawing a gun. A flicker of his slim right hand, a hunching of his right shoulder, and the other man died.

Folks tell of the time Gulden, then little more than a boy, and Billy the Kid got into an argument over a hand of cards. Both men rose to their feet. Glittering black eyes and pale blue met.

"Feller, we're both pretty good," remarked the cheerful Gulden. "If we reach, I reckon we'll both die, and I don't hanker to loaf around hell in your company all through eternity. I got a better way for us to settle things.

"I see you got a nice long blade in your boot. I got one about the same length. The back room of this joint ain't got no window. When you shut the door, it's plumb dark in there—can't see your hand before your face. Now suppose you and me leave our hoglegs out here and go into that room together with just our stickers and have 'em lock the door on the outside. Then we can settle things with our knives, in the dark. Reckon that way one of us might knock on the door to be let out. What say?"

The Kid stared at him a moment. Then he said, "You go to hell." And the most notorious killer the Southwest ever knew turned on his heel and walked away. Gulden grinned his weasel grin, cashed in his chips, forked his horse and rode out of town.

In one characteristic, Gulden differed from his friend the weasel. The furred killer never hunts in packs. He goes it alone. Gulden, on the other hand, had gathered together a bunch of gentle hellions differing little from himself other than that they lacked his brains and ingenuity. The band rode high and handsome over the east Arizona rangeland. They extracted tribute from small ranchers and sheepmen. Nor did they neglect the larger spread owners. The cowmen grumbled, but feared to do much about it. It was said that even the great John Chisum of the famed Jingle Bob brand closed his eyes to the loss of a few cows now and then.

Branch Carter, owner of the big 76 spread, was an exception. Carter refused to pay tribute. When the Gulden bunch raided one of his trail herds, they were met with bullets that did for a couple of them and put the others to flight.

In consequence, Gulden hated Branch Carter. He had glimpsed the 76 owner but that one time, through gunsmoke,

and knew little about him. But Carter's open defiance was an affront that could not be disregarded. Gulden set out to even up the score.

One evening a slender, elegant man with a tight, thin-lipped mouth and glittering black eyes rode up to the 76 cow camp where three young punchers were cooking supper. He accosted one who was a little distance from the campfire attending to a chore.

"What's your name, feller?" he asked.

"Jim Hardy," the other replied. "What's yours?"

But the horseman only replied with another question. "Who you ride for?"

"Branch Carter," the cowboy replied.

"My name's Gulden," said the horseman. "So you ride for Branch Carter? Well, here's your pay!"

His right shoulder hunched and he shot the unprepared cowboy between the eyes. Before the dead puncher's astounded companions could make a move, a racing horse had taken its rider out of range.

THREE DAYS later, Branch Carter walked into the office of Captain Burton Mossman, commander of the Arizona Rangers.

"Burt, I want to join up with your outfit," he said without preamble.

"Join up with the Rangers?" said the astonished captain. "What for? You got all you can do running that big spread of yours."

"I want to get Hunch Gulden, and I want to do it in a lawful manner," was the quiet reply.

The dapper little Ranger captain stared at the tall cowman with the steady gray eyes and lean face.

But Burton Mossman was a man of quick decisions. Otherwise he would not have been the head of the famous battalion of peace officers who brought law to the mesquite.

"All right," he said, "I'll arrange it. Special commission to go after Hunch Gulden. Where do you want the flowers sent—to your ranchhouse?"

Branch Carter did not misunderstand the Ranger Captain's grim humor.

"It will be Gulden who'll need the flowers, only he won't get them," he replied quietly. "What he'll get is six feet of real estate—plenty for a short jigger like him."

"All right," said Mossman, "you're on your own. I figure to get around to Gulden later, but right now I got my hands full with Chacon and his hellions, and I haven't anything like enough men to take care of all the owlhoots in the state. If you can handle Gulden, you'll be doing me and the people of Arizona a big favor. Go to it, feller."

The story of the intrepid Ranger captain's pursuit and capture, lone-handed, of Augustine Chacon, the leader of the worst gang of outlaws and thieves that ever infested the Border, was to become a saga of the Southwest.

Branch Carter sat down to talk with Captain Mossman, a ranch owner. He arose an Arizona Ranger.

A little later, as he watched the tall form of Branch Carter cross the street from his office, Mossman remarked pensively to his clerk, "I got a notion Hunch Gulden is really going to be a land owner before long."

A couple of days passed and Branch Carter bought a train ticket for El Paso, Texas, announcing his intention of an extended visit with relatives.

His decision excited little comment, for it was well known that Carter originally hailed from Texas. His father had brought him to Arizona when he was a child. He was Arizonian more than Texan in habits and characteristics, but he had spent much time with an uncle who owned a spread east of the New Mexico line and was thoroughly familiar with Texas cow methods, some of which, in modified form, he had introduced to his own holdings.

Some two weeks later a tall, broad-shouldered Texas cowboy drifted up to the ranchhouse of old Jethro Kirchner, owner of the Tumbling K spread that ranged southward to the Border through

one of the wildest sections of Arizona.

That he was a Texan was easily apparent from his outfit. He forked a low-horned, clumsy looking Texas saddle with two cinches, the rear one a piece of stiff leather, the front one of horsehair. Neither was more than three inches wide. Instead of the long flexible latigos of soft whang leather so prized by the dashing Arizonian—they got 'em from California—he had a heavy leather "trunk strap" with holes punched in it and a buckle instead of a ring on the cinch. His stirrups were of narrow iron into which he stuck his feet.

His rope was a common sisal not more than thirty feet long with one end tied hard and fast to the saddle horn. There were no dangling chains at the end of his reins next the bit. The reins were not the fancy plaited things favored in Arizona and California. They were merely long, heavy, inch-wide leather straps. They were not tied together but were split reins that could be dropped to the ground when he wished his trained horse to stand. His spurs had rowels two inches wide, more like a circular saw than a spur.

The black butts of the heavy guns, suspended from double cartridge belts, bore no ornamentation of pearl, ivory or silver. He wore faded but clean denim overalls, a shirt of the same material and plain shotgun chaps. His hat was an undecorated, broad-brimmed "J.B." A stubble of black beard hid the lower part of his face almost to the eyes.

Altogether, there was a lean, efficient look to him that caught Kirchner's eye.

"Light off and cool your saddle," old Jethro told the chuck line rider. "Just getting ready to eat."

KIRCHNER looked his visitor over as they sat in the dining room sampling what the cook had to offer.

"Quite a ways from your home range, feller," he remarked. "I've had a few Texans working for me from time to time and always found 'em to be top hands. Had one a couple of years back. He was a whizzer, but after he'd been with me a few months, a Texas Ranger ambled in and sort of talked that feller into going back to Texas with him to attend a little grand jury session."

He glanced keenly at his table companion as he spoke, but the cowboy merely nodded and went on eating.

"I liked the feller," the garrulous ranch owner resumed. "He was a plumb nice jigger. Never talked much and attended to his own business. Fact is, if the feller had just told me a mite about himself, the chances are when that Ranger happened along, he would have been riding line down along the Border, where it's plumb easy for a feller to step across into *manana* land if he don't hanker for company. Wasn't none of my concern that he happened to shoot a few fellers over in Texas. He never shot anybody here."

He paused again, but again received no response beyond another nod.

Later they sat together in the living room and smoked.

"I could use a top hand or two right now," Kirchner observed.

"And reckon I could use a job of riding about now," was the response.

"What name shall I put on the payroll?" asked Kirchner.

"Reckon Bill Curly is a pretty good handle," the other replied.

"Okay, Curly—Tom Knolles, my range boss, will give you the lowdown on your chores," the ranch owner said.

That evening, Kirchner remarked contemplatively to the taciturn Knolles, "That new feller, Curly, has a familiar look to him. Seems to me I've seen him somewhere, but I can't place where."

"Liable to have seen a picture on a reward notice in a sheriff's office," grunted Knolles.

"Well," replied Kirchner, "we ain't sheriffs, and we need hands."

"Hope he ain't one of Hunch Gulden's sidewinders here to get the lay of things," responded Knolles. "Don't look it, but you never can tell."

Branch Carter went to bed that night

highly elated over Jethro Kirchner's failure to penetrate his disguise. He had met Kirchner several times in the past and talked with him. And he had contacted Hunch Gulden only once, and then under highly hectic circumstances. However, he did not underestimate Gulden.

"That devil has the sort of eyes that see around corners and through chunks of mountain," he told himself.

Carter, as Billy Curly, went to work for the Tumbling K. Three days later Tom Knolles expressed grudging admiration.

"As fine a cowhand as I ever had under me," he told the Tumbling K owner.

"Fine!" applauded Kirchner. "Set him to work down in the south brakes. Lots of combing out and branding and horn cutting to do down there. Just the sort of a chore for a top hand what likes to go it alone."

Branch Carter was pleased with the assignment. He knew that Kirchner had been losing stock, mostly calves and close-to-yearlings that had escaped the branding iron. And the south pastures of the Tumbling K were ideal for owlhoot operations.

So as he combed, branded and sawed horns, Carter kept his eyes open.

His first break came after nearly a week of monotonous work. One morning, while riding the brush, he saw a faint gray streak rising into the sky at no great distance to the left.

"Smoke," he told his horse. "Somebody's getting a small fire going. This looks like it."

He sent his horse in the direction of the streamer, carefully picking a way through the growth. When he judged he was a couple of hundred yards distant from the fire that caused it, he dismounted and proceeded on foot, noiseless as an Indian. The brush was thinning and soon he reached its final fringe.

Peering cautiously through the tangle of branches, he saw two men squatting beside a small fire not ten yards distant. A large calf was stretched helpless and one of the men was busy on its hide with a running iron, while the other held its nose to keep it from bawling as the hot metal seared its flesh. Both had their backs to him.

CARTER glided forward. The first intimation the two slick iron artists had of his presence was his voice biting at them. "Elevate!"

The branders froze, rigid. Slowly they raised their hands, shoulder high. There was nothing else to do.

Carter spoke again. "Stand up and turn around," he ordered.

The pair obeyed. Their faces whitened as they looked into the black muzzles of two rock-steady guns.

Branch Carter let his cold gray eyes rest on their faces a moment. They were hard looking specimens, all right, and Carter was pleased with the fact. They did not have the appearance of ordinary brush-running cow thieves.

"Don't you figger you might be making a little mistake with that critter?" he asked mildly. He had already noted that the newly run brand was a Bradded L, the burn of a small spread a few miles to the west of Kirchner's holdings, owned by a man named Lake.

One of the slick ironers flushed. "Damn you, you got us," he growled. "You don't need to be rubbing it in."

"I ain't rubbing it in," Carter replied. "But this happens to be Tumbling K range. All right, blot that burn. Crisscross it like a feller does when his iron has slipped, and plumb spile that L. Then run a Tumbling K on the critter's hide."

Sullenly the two obeyed.

"Now get the ropes off the critter," Carter directed. "Then fork your cayuses and get out of here, pronto."

The pair stared at him, unbelievingly. "You—you mean you ain't taking us in?" the one who spoke before asked.

"I ain't no sheriff," Carter told him. "I ain't taking nobody in. If a feller wants to fatten his herd a mite, that ain't none of my business. But I work for Kirchner, and when I work for a

man, I figger it's up to me to look after his interests, and I aim to do it. There are plenty more spreads hereabouts—the big JB up to the north, for example. You fellers do your cinch-ring work up there or somewhere, but keep off Tumbling K range. If I catch you again, I'll do my talking with smoke."

He holstered his guns as he spoke and stood with his lean, muscular hands resting on his cartridge belts, over the black butts of the Colts.

The other gazed at those bronzed hands and nodded to himself.

"Much obliged, feller," he said, "you're real, all right. And you won't be bothered by us any more. By the way, expect to be in town Saturday night?"

"Could be," Carter replied noncommittally. He fished the makings from his pocket as he spoke and deftly rolled a cigarette with his left hand.

"Us fellers expect to be there," the other said. "Thought maybe you'd like to have a drink with us. We generally hang out in the Four Deuces."

"Chances are I'll be there, if something don't come up to hold me," Carter agreed. "Reckon I could stand a snort."

"Would like to have a mite of a talk with you," said the brander. "Be seeing you."

Carter watched them mount their horses and ride away. Then he slowly made his way back to his own horse.

"May mean nothing," he told the cayuse. "Chances are they won't show up. But then again it might work out into considerable. They're a salty pair of hombres, all right, and the one who did the talking 'pears to have considerable savvy. I've a notion he was figuring out something in his mind."

WHEN he walked into the Four Deuces, Saturday night, Carter was really surprised to see the slick iron pair standing at the bar. They observed him and waved to him to join them.

"None of that," said the taller of the two as Carter put his hand in his pocket. "Your money's no good tonight, feller. We're doing the buying. We ain't working for no forty-per-and-found."

"Okay," Carter replied.

After several rounds of drinks, the pair grew sociable and more voluble.

"My name's Skelton, Pierce Skelton," announced the taller. "My bunky is Curt Dunlap. What's your handle?"

Carter supplied the name by which he was known to the Tumbling K.

"Suppose we amble over to that corner table, where there ain't nobody close, and talk," Skelton suggested.

"Don't see how a feller like you is satisfied to be twirling a rope and churning a iron for peanuts," Skelton remarked, after they were seated and a waiter had brought them drinks.

"Feller has to live," Carter replied.

"Uh-huh, but a feller like you had ought to live a heap better," said Skelton. "How about coming in with us?"

Carter let his gray eyes rest on the other's face. "I ain't risking a hemp necktie or the hot end of a bullet to tie up with a brush-running, calf-hitching outfit," he replied flatly.

An angry sparkle showed in Skelton's eyes.

"You don't know what the devil you're talking about," he said. "Do we look like that sort of road runners? We're in with the top outfit of this section. Our boss has got plenty of moss on his horns."

"You mean he's that feller Chacon I been hearing about since I landed in this section?" Carter asked.

Skelton snorted a derisive oath. "That fourflusher!" he jeered. "He's just a terrapin-brained maverick that goes in for shorthorn stuff. He's on the prod against folks this side the Line. Whenever he manages to ketch a jigger he pegs him out over an ant hill or sticks him on the spines of a Chola cactus or ties him to a fire stake. Our boss don't waste time with such foolishment. If he don't like a feller he shoots him and gets it over with. He goes in for big stuff and he's got plenty of savvy. Our boss is Hunch Gulden."

Carter did not appear impressed.

"Hunch Gulden," he repeated. "Who's he?"

Skelton's eyes widened. "Where in blazes you been living all your life, feller?" he demanded. "You mean to say you never heard tell of Hunch Gulden?"

"I'm from Texas," Carter said.

"Reckon that explains it," Skelton admitted. "If you was from this section, you wouldn't have to ask. Hunch Gulden is plumb salty and he's got savvy."

"Maybe," Carter agreed. He regarded the other coldly. "Maybe," he repeated, "but it looks like to me that the fellers with him are a mite on the short side, taking up with a total stranger this way."

Skelton leaned over and tapped the table top with his finger. "Listen, feller," he boasted, "I don't make mistakes. I sized you up right the other morning."

Carter appeared to consider. "Reckon you got something there," he admitted.

"Uh-huh, I have," said Skelton. "Even if you don't see fit to come in with us, I calculate we don't have to worry about you doing any out-of-turn talking."

Carter nodded. "Reckon you don't have to worry about any talking I'm liable to do," he replied with significance that was lost on his hearers. "But why are you so anxious to have me tie up with you, seeing as you fellers are already setting pretty?"

"I'll tell you why," Skelton replied frankly. "We're a mite short-handed right now for things we've got in mind. We had a run-in with a bunch over to the west and lost three top hands. And then a blankety-blank named Carter, who owns a spread over to the east of here, did for a couple of the boys. We aim to even up that score sooner or later, but right now we need some good men. We're on the lookout for 'em."

He paused to gulp his drink and call for another.

Carter regarded him gravely for a moment, took a long draught at his cigarette and spoke slowly.

"You're not coming clean, feller. There's more to it than that. Lay your cards on the table if you want to talk business."

SKELTON looked startled. His partner, Dunlap, muttered under his breath. The pair glanced at one another. Skelton seemed to make up his mind.

"I said you was smart, in the beginning," he said. "You're right, feller. Right now we need a mite of special help and we figger you can hand it to us. What say, how about taking a little ride with us to a place where some of the boys hang out and we'll go into everything?"

Carter considered, studying the pair. He decided that Skelton was sincere, and he didn't give him credit for having enough brains to work out a subtle plan of deceit, or to even properly present a scheme in which he had been coached by a smarter hombre.

"Okay," he said, "I'll give it a whirl."

The ride was a long one, but Carter, thoroughly familiar with the section, defined where they were heading.

"Sime Lake's Bradded L," he told himself. "This is beginning to work out. Now if Lake just doesn't recognize me. I've met him a couple of times."

He knew very well what the result would be if Lake did recognize him. But after his experience with Kirchner he felt fairly easy in his mind on that score.

They reached the Bradded L *casa*, a tightly constructed building set on a rise. The windows were shuttered and to all appearances the ranchhouse was deserted. However, in answer to Skelton's hail, the door opened revealing a lighted living room. They entered and Carter saw nearly a dozen men lounging about. Seated at a table in the center of the room was a bearded giant of a man with truculent eyes whom Carter instantly recognized as Sime Lake.

"Which one is Gulden?" he asked Skelton, in low tones, although he knew very well that the elegant little outlaw leader was not among those present.

"Hunch ain't here," Skelton muttered reply. "He don't never show up with the

bunch inside like this. He tells Lake what to say and Sime hands us our powders. Gulden joins up with us when there's work to do."

"Don't take no chances, eh?" Carter remarked.

"Reckon that's right," Skelton admitted. "He don't trust nobody over much. Reckon he wouldn't be up and kicking if he did."

He raised his voice and addressed the man at the table.

"Sime, this is the feller I was telling you about—Bill Curly," he said.

Lake glowered at Carter. "Come over here and set," he growled, indicating a chair on the opposite side of the table. "Want to look you over."

Carter took the proffered seat. He instantly noted that the other men in the room were eyeing him in an expectant manner. Plainly something was in the wind. He had a sudden chill feeling that he had been led into a trap. His lips tightened slightly, but otherwise he gave no sign of perturbation.

The burly Lake scowled at him under his craggy brows. "Want to join up with us, eh?" he rumbled.

"I didn't say so," Carter shot at him.

Lake seemed taken aback at the unexpected answer. "But—but—"

"Listen," Carter cut in, "your hands come to me with a proposition. I gather you got use for me, for some reason or other. What it is I don't know, but I reckon that'll come out later. What I want to know pronto is what is there in it for me?"

Lake glared angrily. "*You* listen," he growled. "If you do the right thing, there's plenty in it for you. If you don't, there's liable to be plenty, too, of another sort. And get this straight. I give the orders here, when the big boss ain't around. You do as you're told and you'll get along. If you don't—"

Carter sensed a quick increase in the air of expectancy in the room. He tensed for instant action. He was ready when Lake's hand flashed down and up. A knife glittered.

CARTER'S right hand shot out. His fingers coiled around Lake's wrist like flexible rods of steel. Lake's hand was jammed back, turned. The knife point lunged toward his hairy throat, stayed with the razor edge just drawing blood from the skin.

There was a catching of breaths throughout the room. For every man there knew that Carter could just as easily have driven the long blade clean through Lake's throat.

For an instant Carter maintained his terrible grip on the giant's wrist, while Lake sat rigid, not daring to move a muscle. Then he dropped his hand and sat back in his chair, his cold gaze on Lake's distorted countenance.

"Lake," he said quietly, "don't ever try to run a whizzer on me again. If you pull a knife or a gun, use it, if you can. You'll never get a second chance."

The Bradded L owner sat staring at him, his face white, his eyes wide and dazed. He had just looked across into eternity. And it wasn't far!

Carter fished the makings from his pocket and rolled a cigarette with his left hand, his right motionless on the table. Not a crumb of tobacco spilled.

Lake raised a shaking hand.

"I—I didn't mean nothing," he mumbled. "It's just a little trick we play on a new feller to see how his nerve is. You come through all right."

"Okay," Carter replied. "Now that's over with, let's hear your proposition."

Before Lake could speak, the hard-faced Skelton laughed aloud. "Didn't I say I could pick 'em?" he chortled. Nobody showed any inclination to disagree.

"Feller," Lake said, with a glower at Skelton, "you hit it off right when you said we got use for you. Here's how the deal lies. Reckon you've heard of old Val Owens of the JB, over to the west and north of Jethro Kirchner's holdings?"

"Heard some talk about him," Carter admitted.

"Well," resumed Lake, "reckon you've heard the JB is long and away the biggest spread in this section. We happen

to know that Owens has got a whopping big shipping herd together. We got a market all set for them cows, if we can get 'em. If we tie onto 'em, we'll all be on easy street for quite a spell. We know Owens is going to ship, but we don't know just when he figgers to take the trail or which route he'll use. He can use any one of three.

"No use to try and tail him. He uses outriders and advance and rear guard men, and he's plumb smart. He'd spot us in a hurry and we wouldn't have a chance. But if we can find out just when he aims to roll, which trail he'll take and where he'll bed down for the night, we can put it over. Kirchner will know what he has in mind. We learned that Kirchner is going to lend him some of his Tumbling K hands to help make the drive. Figure you can get the info out of Kirchner and pass it along to us?"

"I might," Carter admitted. "Kirchner is considerable of a talker and he ain't over bright, and he 'pears to have took a shine to me."

"If you can do that, we'll be setting pretty," Lake said. "You'll cut in and share alike with the rest of us. O.K.?"

Carter appeared to consider. He raised his eyes to the ring of villainous faces closed around the table.

"What do you fellers say?" he asked. "Will your boss back up what this jigger promises?"

There was a general nodding of heads.

"Lake is Gulden's right-hand man," said Skelton. "You can bank on what he says."

"All right," Carter replied tersely. "I'll give it a whirl. I can't promise anything, but I'll do what I can. If I put it over, I'll get in touch with you pronto. Be somebody here all the time?"

"I'll be here," Lake promised.

OLD Jethro Kirchner was alone in his living room when Carter entered the following evening. "Take a load off your feet, Curly," he invited.

Carter sat down. He removed his hat and cast it aside.

"Kirchner," he said, "don't you recognize me?"

Old Jethro stared at him. "Feller," he replied, "from the first time I saw you, I figured I'd ought to know you, but I'm darned if I can place you?"

"Mighty glad you couldn't," Carter replied, "but I happen to be Branch Carter."

Kirchner gaped, his eyes widening.

"By gosh, so you are!" he exploded. "I get you now, even with that brush on your face. What in blazes has come over you, Carter? What's the big notion? Have you gone plumb loco?"

Carter was fumbling inside his shirt. He laid something on the table between them. Kirchner stared in astonishment at the gleaming silver badge of the Arizona Rangers.

"Wh-what in blazes?" he stuttered. "Why are you packing a Ranger badge?"

"Kirchner," Carter said, "I joined up with the Rangers to get Hunch Gulden. You'll rec'lect he did for one of my hands. A snake-blooded killing if there ever was one. I'm out to even up the score, and with your help I can do it."

Tersely he outlined the situation. Kirchner's eyes blazed with excitement.

"Do you think you can get Owen to agree?" Carter asked in conclusion.

"Sure I can get him to agree," Kirchner promised instantly. "He'll be plumb tickled to get a chance at that sidewinder. His herd rolls Wednesday morning. He aims to bed down in the mouth of Skull Canyon."

"That's perfect," Carter said. "Gulden will know it's a quick run to the Border from there. It will look like everything is playing right into his hands. Now here's what I want you to do."

Kirchner listened, nodded.

"What you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm riding with Gulden's bunch," Carter replied.

Kirchner shook his head. "If they catch onto you, your life won't be worth a busted cartridge," he predicted grimly.

"I'll chance it," Carter replied. "If you

fellers handle your end of the chore right, I figure I'll come through."

Carter relayed the information to Sime Lake that night. Wednesday afternoon found him again at Lake's Bradded L *casa*.

"We'll start out right after dark," Lake explained. "That way we'll make Skull Canyon a couple of hours before daylight tomorrow. I know how to get into that crack. We'll sneak down under cover of the brush and land on 'em just before it gets light. There'll be enough moon for straight shooting. That canyon is plumb perfect for making a raid. Then we'll have daylight to shove 'em across the Border by. We'll need it. Rough going down there."

The band, nearly a dozen in number, rode away from the casa in the gloom of falling night. Before they had covered a mile, a single horseman on a tall black rode from a side trail and took his place at the head of the bunch. Carter's lips tightened as he recognized Gulden.

Dawn was not far off when the owlhoot bunch reached the mouth of Skull Canyon. The great JB shipping herd was bedded down a short distance south of the canyon mouth. Blanket rolls showed dimly around the dying fire. Two slow-pacing horses circled the herd, on their backs shadowy shapes that swayed easily to the motion of the animals.

The owlhoots circled through the brush till they were directly opposite the camp and less than a score of yards distant. In utter silence they took their places. "Lake, Skelton, you look after the nighthawks," Gulden hissed. "All right, let 'em have it!"

THE silence of the night was shattered by a roar of shots. Bullets hammered the blanket rolls. The shapes on the pacing horses swayed and jerked as the terrified animals fled madly. But they did not fall. Which was not overly strange, seeing as they were but overall suits stuffed with straw and firmly roped to the hulls.

Yelling and shooting, the owlhoots charged the camp. Branch Carter veered his horse to the left at top speed.

Without warning the opposite brush wall fairly exploded with gunfire. Half of Gulden's men went down at the first murderous volley. Gulden's frenzied scream knifed through the turmoil an instant too late.

"Look out! Look out! It's a trap!"

The panic-stricken outlaws fired wildly in return, and fell even as they fired. Scant seconds later, the mere handful left alive howled for mercy.

Southward past the milling herd crashed a tall black horse. Old Jethro Kirchner's stentorian bellow rolled across the clearing: "Look out, Branch, there goes Gulden! He's getting away!"

Instantly Carter whirled his big roan and sent him thundering in pursuit.

But the terrified cattle had scattered in every direction. Carter found himself tangled in a pandemonium of clashing horns, rolling eyes and splaying hoofs. By the time he won free, Gulden had a head start, was but a speeding blotch in the strengthening light.

"Thank Pete it's open country for miles and full daylight isn't fifteen minutes off," Carter muttered as he settled himself in the saddle for a long and grueling chase.

Swiftly the miles rolled back under the roan's flying hoofs. They drummed the dawn up into the sky, a scarlet and gold splendor speared with silver light that flooded the wasteland with radiance. Far ahead, misty with distance, were the mountains of Mexico. But for miles the level prairie rolled on with only groves and bristles of thicket to break the flat monotony.

Gulden's tall black was a splendid animal, but the big roan Carter rode was the better horse, and slowly but surely he closed the distance. By the time the sun was well up, only three hundred yards separated quarry and pursuer.

Twisting around in his saddle, Gulden fired a shot. Another and another. Carter heard the whine of the passing lead but he grimly held his own fire and gave

all his attention to riding. Directly ahead was a patch of grove, underbrush growing thickly between the tree trunks, that flanked the trail on either side. Gulden flashed through it along the straight, gray track. Carter thundered in pursuit. He raced beneath the spreading branches, the roan going at flying speed.

Something leaped up from the thick dust like a striking snake, tightened with a hum as of a smartly smitten harp string. The taut rope caught the speeding roan at the knees. He hurled over.

Carter was catapulted from the saddle. He struck the ground with stunning force. Before he could make a move, lithe, sinewy figures darted from the undergrowth and swarmed all over him. He was jerked to his feet, his arms pinned to his sides by turn on turn of rawhide ropes. His guns were plucked from their holsters.

Two hundred yards to the front, Gulden turned in his saddle and gazed back. He slackened his horse's speed. A shot rang out. Gulden leaned low in the saddle, shot a final swift glance back at his helpless pursuer and sent his horse racing around a bend and out of slight.

An icy chill went over Branch Carter as he viewed the dark, ferocious faces of his captors. "Augustine Chacon's half-breed raiders, sure as blazes!" he breathed. "I'm in a spot for fair."

Carter's horse lay dead, its neck broken by the fall. His captors lifted him to the back of a shaggy mustang and tied his ankles securely together by means of a rope drawn under the animal's belly. They spoke among themselves in gutterals the rancher did not understand. Then the whole band mounted and they swept away into the south. Soon, Carter knew, they were across the Border and in Mexico.

BRANCH CARTER suffered no delusions as to what was in store for him. He had heard too much of Chacon's usage of captives. He knew, too, that there was little hope of rescue. The breeds, more than half Indian, as was their vicious leader, knew the trails and the hideouts and were past-masters at throwing off possible pursuit. No, he was in for it and all he could do was make the best and bravest end possible.

Well past mid afternoon, they entered a gloomy canyon. A few miles farther on they reached the breeds' camp, a half-circle of rude but strongly built huts set in a belt thicket that hid them.

Again that cold chill of near-panic swept over Branch Carter as he saw, in the center of an open space before the huts, a stout post which was black and charred by eating flames. In the ashes lay a heap of fire-seared chains.

The breeds lifted Carter from the horse and led him to the post. Swiftly the chains were wrapped around his body and made fast. Twigs and faggots were piled around his feet until the heap was waist high. Then his captors left him and entered the huts. Soon sounds of a meal being prepared were heard.

Blind with weariness, his body aching from the effects of the terrific fall he had suffered, Carter sagged in his bonds, so utterly worn out and miserable that he really cared very little what happened to him.

Slowly the awful hours passed. The breeds, busy with their own activities, failed to see the glittering black eyes that from the concealment of the dense thicket noted their every move.

Just about sunset there was a sound of approaching horse's hoofs on the stones. Another moment and a man rode into the clearing. He was a tall, strikingly handsome man with glowing eyes and cruelly sinister face.

"Chacon himself!" Carter muttered. "So they've been waiting for him."

The outlaw chief dismounted and strode over to the captive. A slow smile played across his face. His expression was one of terrible gloating. For a long moment he said not a word.

In the thicket, the unseen watcher drew a gun and gently fingered the trigger.

"One slug for Chacon when he orders the fire lit, and one for Carter," he breathed. "After that we'll see."

But Chacon did not voice the order. Instead he turned to his followers and said in perfect Spanish:

"Get the chains off him. Lock him in the cabin. Give him food. Give him drink. A man must be strong to die well. This one is half dead already."

Carter was quickly loosed of the chains. The ropes that still swathed his numbed arms were cut. Reeling and staggering, he was shoved into one of the end cabins. It had no windows. The door was of stout planks and opened outward. A heavy wooden bar laid in slots secured it on the outside. Built against one wall was a bunk on which were tumbled blankets. He heard the door slam shut, the bar drop into place. He lurched to the bunk and sat down.

After a while some measure of his strength returned. He got stiffly to his feet and groped around the dark room. There was a chink in the door. He placed his eye against it and saw that a guard with a rifle crooked in his arm was stationed just outside. Escape was impossible. He walked back to the bunk. A few minutes later the door opened. A heaping plate of food and a jug of water were shoved in. The door thudded shut again.

Carter was parched with thirst and he drank gratefully of the water. Then he forced himself to eat the food, although he had little appetite. He wanted to build up his strength as much as he could. Then when his captors came for him in the morning he would put up a desperate fight, hoping to force them to shoot him. After he had cleaned the plate, he threw himself in the bunk and was almost instantly asleep.

Carter knew he must have been sleeping many hours when he awakened with a start. A bar of faint light was streaming across his face through the door.

"Carter! Branch Carter!" came a hissing whisper from the darkness.

"Yes?" Carter whispered back.

"Come out of it," came from the unseen speaker. "Don't make a noise."

Carter swung his feet to the floor and glided across the room to the door. A figure loomed outside, a slender, lance-straight figure.

"Gulden!" Carter breathed. "What in blazes!"

"I just don't aim to see them black devils do to any white man what they figure doing to you, that's all," was Gulden's reply. "Come on or we're sunk. It's nearly daylight. I thought the hellions would never go to sleep. Come on, I got a horse for you. Found him straying in the brush. No saddle. Rope for a bridle. But a horse!"

WITH Carter, his head in a whirl, following close behind, Gulden darted for the growth behind the cabin. Just as they reached it, a blood-curdling yell seemed to fill earth and heaven.

"That infernal guard!" swore Gulden. "I didn't hit him hard enough! Come on, feller!"

He crashed through the brush, Carter at his heels. They reached a little cleared space. Two horses, Gulden's black and a shaggy mustang, loomed in the strengthening light.

Gulden flung himself into the saddle. Carter mounted to ride bareback. The outlaw set the pace and they went crashing through the brush to the more open floor of the canyon. Behind them sounded the shouts and curses of the breeds.

"They'll be after us pronto, but we got a start," yelped Gulden. "Ride, feller!"

"How'd you know me?" Carter asked, as the mustang floundered over the rocks.

"Got a good look at you while you were tied to the post," Gulden called back. "See a face once and never forget it. Spotted you despite your whiskers. Say, what's the matter? Can't you keep up?"

"This horse is lame," Carter replied. "Reckon that's why he was straying loose. He's doing the best he can."

Gulden swore a string of appalling

oaths and slowed his own mount. They flashed from the canyon mouth and headed north. The east was graying, the light swiftly increasing.

"It's going to be touch and go," Gulden yelled. "I hear 'em. They're coming fast." He drew his rifle from its scabbard and passed it to Carter.

"We'll take some of 'em along with us, anyhow," he promised grimly. "I got my sixes."

Branch Carter arrived at a sudden decision. After all, Gulden had saved him from a terrible death, at the risk of his own life. "Ride on, feller," he shouted to his companion. "You can make it. I'll hold 'em back a spell."

"Shut up!" Gulden bellowed. "Try to get some speed out of that flea-bag. We're seeing this through together. They heard us yesterday—heard me shooting at you, I reckon. Laid their trap, then downed you. Just wait till I line sights with some of 'em!"

With the mustang limping badly they hurtled on. Behind them sounded faint yells, momentarily growing louder. They crashed through a straggle of thicket. A moment later Carter twisted in his saddle and sighted the pursuing breeds.

"Ten of 'em," Gulden counted. "Big odds, but we'll do what we can. Ride, feller, there's a clump of rocks ahead."

Swiftly the breeds closed the distance. Lead began whining past. Carter glanced back again. The pursuing killers were but a scant two hundred yards distant.

Carter jerked his laboring mount to a slithering halt. He dropped to the ground, faced the pursuit and clamped the rifle butt to his shoulder. He was totally unprepared for Gulden's move.

With a high-pitched animal screech, the outlaw whirled his horse and charged straight at the yelling breeds, a flaming gun in each hand.

Two of the breeds spun from their saddles. A third fell, and then a fourth.

But the odds were too great. Gulden suddenly rose in his stirrups, reeled sideways and thudded to the ground.

Face bleak and terrible, Branch Carter opened up with the rifle, pouring lead into the demoralized tangle of howling men and plunging horses. With two shots he dropped two more of the raiders. The others, screaming their panic, whirled their horses and fled madly back the way they had come. Carter downed still another before they were out of range. "Seven out of the ten. Not so bad," he muttered.

HE dropped the empty rifle and ran to where Gulden lay on his face, his life draining out through his shattered lungs. He turned the outlaw over and raised him in his arms. The wild glitter was gone from the black eyes. They were clouded with the shadow of death's hovering wing. Suddenly, however, a flash of intelligence crossed their dimming surface. Gulden's sharp, milk-white teeth showed in his weasel grin.

"Carter, the joke's on you," he whispered through the blood frothing in his throat. "I'm—giving you the—the slip!"

His eyes closed. He sighed chokingly, and was dead. Branch Carter gazed down at the motionless form.

"Feller," he said, "you deserve to rest peaceful. Reckon I've got time, even if those hellions get reorganized and come back, which I don't figure they will."

First he reloaded the rifle. Next he picked up Gulden's fallen sixes, loaded them and thrust them into his own empty holsters. Then he hunted around till he located a suitable crevice. Into it he gently lowered Gulden's limp body. He jammed the crevice with boulders, heaped them in a low mound above it.

"Reckon that'll keep you safe from the coyotes," he muttered.

With a glance to the south, he then stepped to Gulden's black horse, which had stood patiently all the while, and forked it. He turned for a last look at the lonely mound, and spoke the dead outlaw's requiem, in the highest compliment the rangeland can pay:

"Bad! Bad all the way through. But a man to ride the river with!"

QUESTIONS HUNTING

Question: Should I always keep a tight line on a fast fighting fish?—Jack Fenmore, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Answer: I'm happy to have you ask that question, Jack. I like to be different. I believe that your answer would be "yes" from any other angling authority save myself. I say, "no." Slack off line when your hooked fish jumps into the air—it'll save you many fish, lose you few. In the air a fish goes into writhing contortions. He uses the taut line as a leverage to jerk the hook loose if he is light hooked. If solidly hooked he often hits the leader with his tail or body, or falls on it, snapping it against a tight line. If the line is slacked off he simply falls into the water, still hooked in most cases.

It might seem that when using a heavy plug, such as with black bass, a slack line would permit easier shaking loose of the lure. Experiments that I have made on many black bass have proven this not to be the case.

Last year I got a letter from a fellow in Michigan who was losing his big rainbow on the high jump. I advised him to slack off on the leap. He reported that it worked to perfection. So here we have proof that comes from other than my own rod.

F. H. A.

Question: I often find it impossible to hunt up wind for deer, due to lay of the land. Is it absolutely essential to hunt up wind for deer?—R. M. Severn, Chester, Pa.

Answer: No. It is best to hunt deer up wind, but not absolutely essential for success. However, a down wind hunter must realize that he is hunting down wind and act accordingly. Put yourself in the deer's shoes.

He is bedded down and an up wind hunter approaches. He does not realize the hunter is near until he hears or sees him. In panic he leaps up and bounds away, most often not affording a shot. What happens when the down wind hunter approaches this same deer. He scents the man but he doesn't know where he is or what he may do. So he lays doggo, waiting developments. When he finally locates the hunter, through sight or sound, he most often does not bound away in panic, but takes a slow sneak. The hunter who hunts down wind, moving quietly, taking advantage of cover, keeping his eyes wide open, may spot that deer in his day bed or locate him in his slow sneak by a moving twig or bough.

I killed a seven point blacktail (western count), three years back in the Medford, Oregon, area, while hunting down wind. I saw this buck laying under a low evergreen, his head and neck stretched out along the ground, laying doggo, trying to locate me. I often hunt down wind, usually during the middle of the day when deer are bedded down.

F. H. A.

Question: I acquired two black and tan hounds from a friend who is leaving the country. He told me that they were good hunting dogs. They trail down game such as coyote and bobcat, but don't seem to be able to make kills after they corner their quarry. What's wrong with my hounds?—Bill Jensen, Yakima, Washington.

Answer: Doggone if you haven't got a pair of dogs there, Bill. They seem to be doing all right for themselves. It is a hound's duty to trail down and bring to bay his quarry. You're the gent that does the killing. Regardless of tall tales to the contrary, the average flop eared trail hound is not a killer like his cousin, the greyhound. The trail hound puts on a good show of fighting, bellowing loud enough to lay the grass in the next county, but doing little damage against such quick slashing animals as the coyote and the bobcat. There are exceptions, of course, but those kind you don't want. They might corner bear or cougar.

The best pack of hounds that I ever followed belonged to a western government hunter. I have watched these hounds fight a trapped coyote for minutes at a time, getting all cut up in the process, while the coyote remained comparatively unharmed. The professional hunter does not want his valuable dogs to move in on dangerous game. Their nose, stamina, and staying power are the things that count. Use the bullet, Bill, and spare a pair of good hounds.

F. H. A.

& FISHING ANSWERS

Question: I have a .30-40 Krag, remodeled into a sporter, with a 22 inch barrel. Has shortening the barrel hurt this rifle? What load should I use for deer and elk?—Verle Peters, Rawlins, Wyoming.

Answer: Shortening the barrel has not hurt your rifle. Muzzle blast will be slightly increased, of course, but velocity should not be reduced over 50 foot seconds. I'd use the 180 grain soft point on deer, the 220 grain on elk in this rifle.

F. H. A.

Question: I'm planning a fishing trip next summer in Colorado. They tell me that they have a fly out there called the Pink Lady that is a favorite. How is this fly tied?

Answer: The Pink Lady is very popular along the Gunnison River in Colorado. It is tied with a gold tag, a pheasant tail, gold ribs, body of pink floss, brown hackle, wings gray speckled. I'd use it in size 10.

F. H. A.

Question: I have often read how the old-timers of the west knocked down buffalo, bear and other game at ranges that seem to me to have been far beyond the powers of the rifles of that day, such as the Sharpes and Henrys. Were these old-timers just telling windys?—Cliff Chelton, Trenton, N. J.

Answer: Never question the veracity of an old-timer, Cliff. It just ain't a'tall healthy. I'll add my windy to the tall tales of the west, for I too have made a few of those barrel stretching shots and know how they were accomplished.

These shots were made by elevating the barrel above the target and sending the slug in an exaggerated arc. You'll note that the fine print on a box of .22 cartridges states the contents are dangerous within one mile, yet you know they have only a hundred yard accuracy.

Two hundred yards was a good range for a .50 calibre Sharpes, yet there were plainsmen who were able to test the wind with a wet finger, hold high and shove a half pound of lead between the ribs of a buffalo at three times that range. This was an art developed from long practice, where the country was flat and close ranging "sneaking up" was durn nigh impossible at times. The western pioneer, most fortunately, was able to overcome handicaps with ingenuity. Otherwise the descendants of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse might well be still ruling the western prairies.

F. H. A.

Question: Can you give me a trick that will fool these prairie coyotes? I can't seem to trap them successfully. Al Devers, Scotts Bluff, Nebraska.

Answer: That question takes me back, Al. I was the poorest coyote trapper west of the Mississippi, until old Sid Golden, the slyest fox of them all, took me in hand. I'll pass his trick on to you.

Forget all that nonsense about attempting to make everything about your coyote set look as natural as possible. You've got to dig a hole to set your trap in, for sure. They ain't a hombre this side of the hot place that could make a hole in the ground look natural once it was gouged up. The answer is to dig up a four

foot circle of ground around your set, making the whole layout look as unnatural as possible, not just the six inch spot where your trap jaws lay.

The coyote won't walk in on his first visit, but he'll come back. When he does go in he won't know where that trap lays. This set won't work on a lobo wolf, however. That killer won't ever go in a place that don't look right on the first visit. He has a long memory, which the coyote seems to lack.

F. H. A.

Question: Are tapered and torpedo lines worth the extra money they cost? What line would you recommend for a greenhorn who is learning to use his first fly rod, a nine foot, 5½ ounce job?—R. S. Kule, Cheyenne, Wyo.

Answer: Tapered and torpedo head lines are indeed worth the extra money. They pay off in pleasure and in fish. A couple of years back I had the pleasure of testing out various weights of Shakespeare tapered and torpedo head lines on several rods. I found that the torpedo head was best for broad streams, the tapered still king of the little brook.

For your nine foot, 5½ ounce rod, used on the average Wyoming stream, I'd recommend a double tapered line in HDH weight. The double taper is the most economical, as it can be reversed when one end wears out.

(Also See "Fur, Fins and Feathers," Page 6)

Kind of Suspicious

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

THEY rode with the careless ease of men who had spent a great deal of their lives in the saddle. Buck Radford was big and husky. His face was not what could be considered handsome, but it was rugged. He was young in years but old in experience and range savvy.

Steve Wilton was dark, thin faced, wore a black mustache and frequently had been mistaken for a Mexican. He also had been around. The two were tophands when they were working, but at present the desire to see new country had sent them wandering through a wild region in the southwest part of Texas.

"Never did I see a road that made so many twists and turns to get no place in particular," Radford remarked as they rode along. "Looks like the hombres who built it were following the trail of a rattlesnake."

"What difference does it make?" Wilton asked. "Here it is a nice balmy sunny day with the temperature not more than a hundred and ten in the shade. There's a cool breeze blowing somewhere maybe within fifty miles of here. We're just like the road, going no place in particular and here you are kicking about a few twists and turns."

"Since you put it that way I'm plumb mortified," Radford said with a grin. "Also a lot hotter than I was before you started talking, Steve."

When Peaceful Valley won't live up to its name a pair of wandering waddies get mad and make it act as advertised!

He glanced ahead and discovered there were huge boulders looming high at the right side of the road and smaller rocks to the left. Both men were dressed in range clothes. Wilton wore two guns, and he knew how to use them. Radford had a Colt in the holster on his right hip and he was fast on the draw.

They rode on, and then suddenly reined their horses to a halt as two men dressed in range clothes stepped out from behind the big boulders covering Radford and Wilton with six-guns.

"Look what Santa Claus brought us and it isn't even Christmas," Radford said.

"Hands up!" snapped the younger of the two men with the guns. "Reach sky!" He was big and dark haired and wore two guns though he was only using one. "We're not fooling!"

"Amateur holdup men," Wilton said sadly. "Telling men in the saddle to put their hands up. Why that means we would have to let go of our reins if we did that. How do they know our horses will stand still in a case like that? They don't—and come to think of it, neither do we, Buck."

"You talk too much," said the tall, middle-aged man with a mustache who held a gun in his left hand and was drawing his right hand Colt out of the holster. "But he could be right about them horses being skittish if their riders aren't holding the reins, Lance."

"Being the morbidly curious type," Radford said, staring at the two men in the road, "would you mind telling us just why you two suddenly pop out of nowhere waving guns at perfect strangers?"

"Because I'm Lance Marsh, and this is my foreman, Will Cooper," said the big dark haired man. "And we don't like gunmen."

"Which explains everything in a vague sort of way," Radford said. "Me, I don't like strong cheese much either, but up to now I haven't considered shooting hombres because of it."

"Never mind all the talk," Lance Marsh said impatiently. "You two go back and tell Dan Baxter to keep his gun-slicks off my range."

"This your range?" Radford asked, with a quick glance at the wild, rocky country all around them.

"That's right," Marsh said. "This is part of my range."

"What do you raise around here?" Radford asked. "Antelope?"

FROM somewhere back among the rocks and boulders came the roar of a rifle. A bullet tore through the peak of Lance Marsh's hat. Radford and Wilton swiftly rode into a space between two huge boulders. Marsh and Cooper ducked down behind some low rocks at the other side of the road. Two more shots from the man with the rifle hit the front of the rock that protected Marsh.

"That hombre is playing for keeps," Radford said as he slid out of the saddle. "If folks go around shooting at Marsh like this you can't blame him for not trusting strangers."

"At a time like this I wouldn't even have too much faith in my friends," Wilton said as he also dismounted. "Looks like this is your golden opportunity to show what a crack shot you are with that carbine of yours, Buck."

"Two minds with a single thought," Radford said as he let the reins of his bay hang so the horse stood ground-hitched. He drew the short barreled rifle out of the saddleboot. "You just step out there on the road and let that dry-gulcher shoot at you, Steve. That way I can locate him and pick him off."

"Sometimes I believe you think I'm as simple minded as you look," Wilton said sadly. He stepped to the rear of the wide crack between the two towering boulders as the rifle roared again. "Come here! Look what I found, Buck."

Radford joined his partner. High up on the ledge of a cliff some distance away was a man lying flat as he used the rifle. Because of the shadow cast by the big rocks he could not see the two men in the space between the huge

boulders. Radford raised the carbine to his shoulder, aimed carefully and fired.

The man on the cliff pulled back as the bullet apparently got him in the arm or the shoulder. He lost his grip on the rifle. It slid over the lip of the ledge and fell to the ground at least fifty feet below.

"Shame on you, Buck," Wilton said. "Taking a man's rifle away from him that way. Chances are that gun was his pride and joy, and now from the way it hit that hard ground down there it is just a shadow of its former self."

"Teach him a lesson," Radford said. "Maybe he has learned that if you start shooting at people regardless, the time will come when they start shooting back."

From across the road Lance Marsh and Will Cooper had seen what had happened to the drygulcher up on the side of the cliff. The man was crawling along the ledge, trying to get away as quickly as he could, now that he no longer had his rifle. It was too far for much accurate shooting with a six-gun. Apparently he wasn't badly wounded.

"Now that we have done our good deed for the day," Radford said as he thrust the carbine back into the sheath and swung into the saddle, "let's do like the Arabs and fold up our horses and silently steal away." He frowned as he watched Wilton mount his sorrel. "That don't sound just right."

"Of course it doesn't," said Wilton as they rode back out onto the road. "The Arabs used camels."

The partners nodded as Marsh and Cooper came out from behind the low rocks. "Nice seeing you two alive," Radford said. He noticed that the ranch owner and his foreman both had their guns in their holsters. "Looks like you two changed your minds about holding us up. Probably just as well, seeing as I have less than ten bucks on me, though my partner might even possess twenty dollars."

"A small sum to start you two on a life of crime," said Wilton. "In future years you might think sadly, if I hadn't robbed Buck Bradford and Steve Wilton of twenty-eight dollars and fifty-two cents I never would have started on the outlaw trail."

"You two sound plumb loco," Will Cooper said dazedly. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Just a couple of pilgrims wandering out of the hither into the yon," said Radford, and then his tone grew serious as he looked at Lance Marsh. "You figure that jasper with the rifle was one of your friend Dan Baxter's gunmen?"

"I do," said Marsh. "Sorry we drew down on you the way we did. But when we spotted you heading toward my Walking M range I was sure that you were a couple of Baxter's gunmen."

"I get it," Radford said. "Baxter is the owner of the ranch adjoining the Walking M. Right?"

"Right," said Marsh.

"But even though Baxter has the largest spread in this part of the country he is greedy," continued Radford. "He is just a range hog at heart. He aims to get the Walking M by hook or crook. He will let nothing stand in his way. So he has been hiring gunmen to wipe you out, Marsh."

"That's not exactly right," Marsh said. "In the first place the Walking M is the largest ranch in this part of Texas. Baxter has a small spread over north of here. He doesn't act like a range hog, but he did threaten to hire some gunmen and wipe me out because he claims my outfit has been stealing his stock."

STEVE WILTON grinned and glanced at his partner. "He's much better at telling fortunes with a crystal ball," Wilton said. "But he sure can't read cards very good when he plays poker."

Radford had been quietly studying Marsh and Cooper, and while the ranch owner and the foreman seemed friendly enough now, it was hard to tell just how far they could be trusted. In Rad-

ford's estimation they had been a little too quick to pull their guns on a couple of strangers.

"We'll get our horses and head back to the ranch," Marsh said. "Be glad to have you two come along. Might be that I can find a job for you if you are looking for work."

"Good idea, Boss," said Cooper. "We could use a couple of men right now."

Marsh and Cooper headed back in among the rocks toward the spot where they had left their horses. Radford and Wilton sat in their saddles waiting.

"Now just why would Marsh need a couple of extra hands in mid-summer?" Wilton said softly. "He probably has a big outfit and there won't be too much work for his bunch until fall roundup time. I'm kind of suspicious, Buck."

"Un-huh," said Radford. "And it is sure catching, Steve. I feel the same way. I've been wondering just what would happen if we refused to head for the Walking M with those two?"

"I've got a feeling they would take it right unkindly," Wilton said.

They lapsed into silence as Marsh and Cooper rode out from the rocks on a roan and a pinto. Radford's eyes narrowed as he saw that both men carried carbines in their saddleboots. Men didn't usually carry saddle guns on their own range unless they were hunting, or were looking for trouble.

"All right," Marsh said. "Come on, let's head for the ranch."

"Sorry," Radford said. "But Steve and I have been talking it over. We don't want a job right now. We started out to see this part of the country and we figure we will keep on traveling."

"But I need a couple of extra hands at the ranch," Marsh said impatiently. "At least ride there with us now and give yourselves a chance to think it over."

"No thanks," said Wilton. "We're fast thinkers."

He swung his horse around. As he did so Marsh drew his right hand gun.

"Kind of a foolish move, Marsh," Radford said coldly, as he sat in the saddle covering the ranch owner and the foreman with his own gun. "The way you're acting makes me right suspicious."

"Me, too," said Wilton, as he turned his horse so he faced Marsh and Cooper, one of his guns in his left hand. "You just can't be trusted with guns."

A horseman rode out from behind the rocks. He was a small gray haired man, and there was blood on his right arm where a bullet had creased it. He carried a battered rifle in his saddleboot.

"So you got them," he said as he rode closer. "The range detectives I asked the Cattlemen's Association to send finally got here, looks like."

"You've got your nerve, Dan Baxter," Marsh said, glaring at the little man. "Coming around here after the way you tried to kill me when you were shooting at us with the rifle up on the cliff."

"I caught Marsh and Cooper using a running iron on some of my calves this morning," Baxter told Steve and Buck. "They tried to get me, but I got away. I told them I had sent for men from the Cattlemen's Association. Marsh has the biggest ranch in this part of the country because he has been stealing other folks' stock."

"So that's why you've been so anxious to have us stay with you, Marsh," Radford said. "You figured we were range detectives, and didn't aim to let us out of your sight."

"That's why he told us all that stuff of suspecting we were gunmen hired by Baxter," Wilton said. He swung out of the saddle. "Marsh and Cooper having all those guns make me kind of nervous. Keep them covered while I take some weapons away from them, Buck."

Wilton went to the two men and snatched the two guns out of Lance Marsh's holsters and tossed them to the ground. Then he got Cooper's guns.

"Don't forget those carbines, Steve," Radford said as he kept the rancher and the foreman covered.

Wilton drew out Cooper's carbine and put it down. Then he reached for the stock of the weapon in Marsh's saddle sheath. Wilton uttered a startled exclamation as he drew out an odd looking object. It was a running iron with the butt of an old rifle fastened to the upper end so that when the iron was in the boot it looked like a carbine.

"A running iron," Baxter said as he watched. "Sheriff Adams will be mighty interested when he sees that. He told me he suspected Marsh and his outfit of stealing stock but couldn't prove it."

"Reckon we'll have to take these two to town," said Radford resignedly. "You see we aren't the men from the Cattlemen's Association that you been expecting, Baxter. We're just a couple of wandering waddies."

"Tell the man you're sorry you shot him, Buck," Wilton said with a grin. "You might have killed him."

"Not a chance," Radford said with a smile. "I was aiming at his arm. But I'm sure sorry I shot you, Baxter."

"I'm not," Baxter said. "You two got Marsh and Cooper and that's the important thing." The little gray haired man breathed a sigh of relief. "Now I reckon folks can live without doing so much worry here in Peaceful Valley."

"Peaceful Valley," Radford repeated and then looked at his partner and grinned. "Sure is that, isn't it, Steve?"

"Sure is," said Wilton with a laugh.

ALBUM OF AMERICA'S GREATEST COWBOYS!

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR

The Far-Famed Rio Kid

Follow the adventures of this fighting man of the Frontier and his pards—in full-length action novels every issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN—at all stands!

JIM HATFIELD

The Ace of Texas Rangers

The most daring lawman of the Lone Star State rides every month in an exciting book-length novel by Jackson Cole which is featured in TEXAS RANGERS Magazine!

STEVE REESE

Field Chief of the C.P.A.

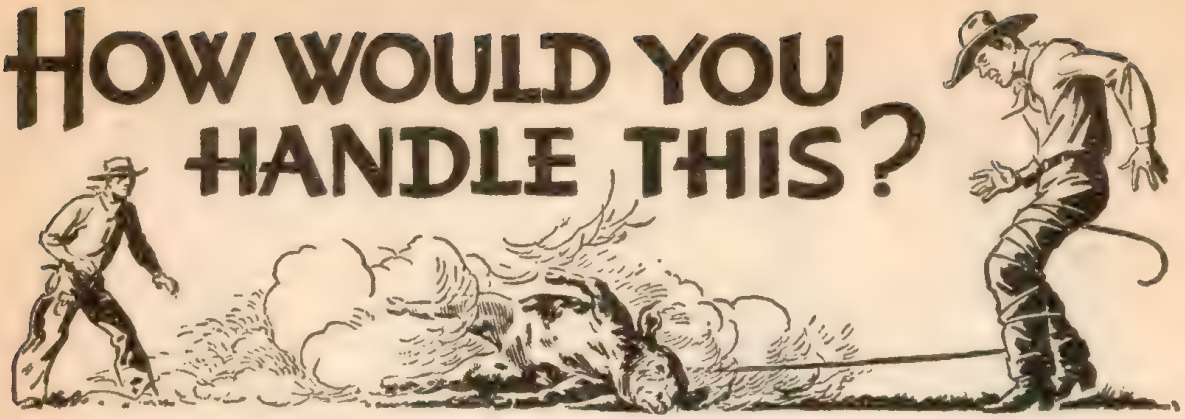
Aided by Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, this Cattlemen's Protective Association sleuth rides the trouble trails of the West—in RANGE RIDERS WESTERN—at all stands!

WAYNE MORGAN

Masked Rider of the Range

The mysterious Robin Hood outlaw and his Yaqui pard, Blue Hawk, come to the aid of the oppressed in exciting novels starred in every issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN!

HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE THIS?



IF YOU were range wise, you should be able to come up with answers to these problems—any one of which might face a cowboy in his daily work. Play the game, don't peek at the answer until you've made an effort to solve the problem yourself. Then turn to page 146, read the correct answer and see how close you were!

DAWN had not yet paled the east when the cowboys piled out of their soogans in electric response to cook's banging of a big spoon on the bottom of a pot.

Frost rimmed every blade of grass in a glittering sheath, and the men warmed their fingers over tin cups of scalding hot coffee.

By the time breakfast had been wolfed the horizon was a lighter gray, and in the murky light the cowboys streaked for the remuda, bridles and saddles over their arms.

The tenderfoot, slowest of the bunch, gulped the last of his coffee, burning his tongue. He scooped up his riding equipment and pounded for his horse.

The tenderfoot roped him without too much difficulty, brought him out of the improvised corral and started to slip on the bridle. But as the bit approached the horse's mouth, he reared up and away, flattening his ears and rolling his eyes until the whites showed.

"Whoa, damn it!" said the tenderfoot irritably. "I ain't going to hurt you. Stand still!"

He tried again and the horse plunged wildly, shaking his head like an old man turning down a request for a loan.

"What's the matter with you?" the tenderfoot asked. "This is nothin' but a nice piece of iron candy. Will yuh quit clowning? The other fellows are a mile away."

Behind him came raucous laughter. "Stay with it, kid!" bellowed the cook. "He wants coaxing!"

The tenderfoot tried coaxing. "You're a good horse," he said. "You're the best horse in the state of Wyoming. And you oughta see the way this slick bridle dresses you up. Why there ain't another horse in the whole world as handsome. Any lady horse would sure fall for you. Now here we go . . ."

And with cunning he tried to sneak over the bridle while rubbing the horse's ears and keeping his attention otherwise engaged.

No soap. The horse tore himself loose, reared wildly. The cowboy tried brute force, and failed. The rope stung his cold hands as he tried to pull the horse's head down.

"What the hell is wrong with the beast?" he asked in despair.

"Why, kid, can't you tell?" asked the cook. "Here, gimme that bridle." He took it and went back to the chuck wagon. Shortly he returned, holding the bridle under his coat.

"Slip it to him fast," he said.

The cowboy took the bridle and advanced upon the horse. Nothing happened. He slipped the leather over the animal's ears, the bit went between his teeth and the bronc began to chomp the roller, making pleasant little jingling sounds.

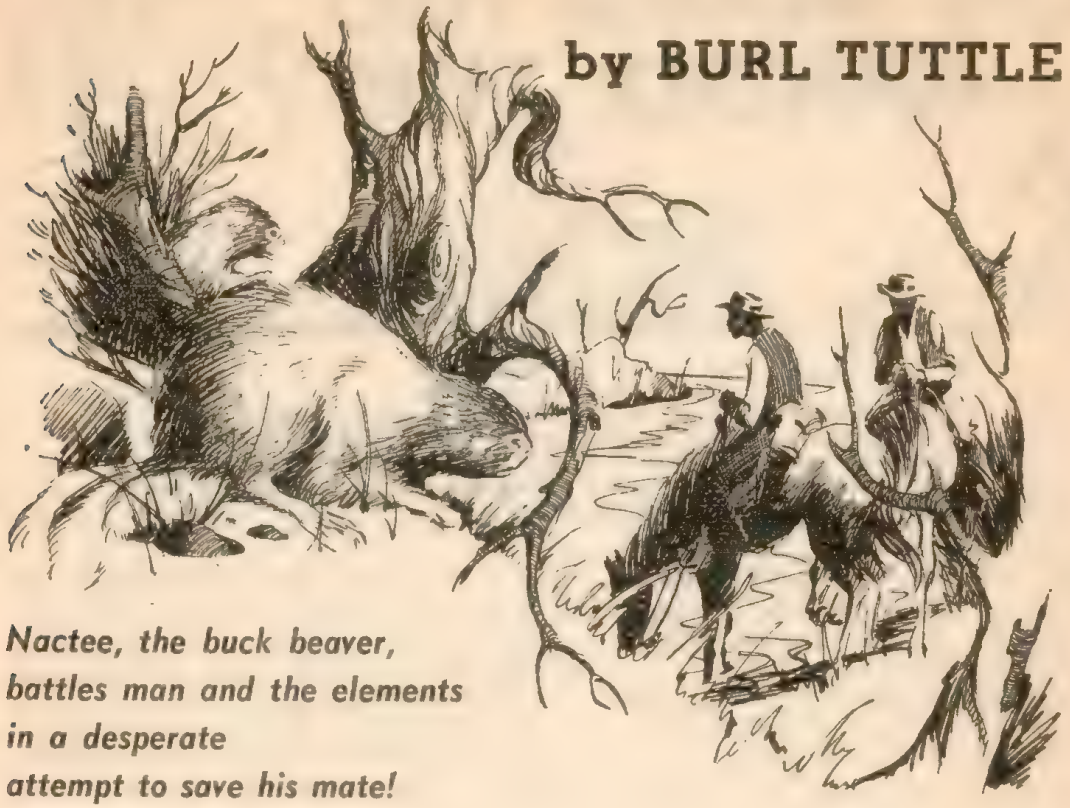
"Well, I'll be— What did you put on it?"

The cook grinned. "You go ahead and catch up with the boys. If you ain't figured it out by tonight I'll tell you what every cowboy learns about horses."

Do you know what the cook did to the bridle to make the horse willing to accept it? If you don't, turn to page 146 for the answer.

FLAT TAIL'S CHALLENGE

by BURL TUTTLE



Nactee, the buck beaver, battles man and the elements in a desperate attempt to save his mate!

NACTEE, the buck beaver and his sleek young mate were the only two of the beaver colony that escaped when dynamite thunder shook the lodges and blasted the dam across Trinity Creek. Together, they floated down the frozen stream, dazed, helpless, among the ice floes and debris of their homes. Not even the heartless trappers who had blown up the colony saw them stir slowly with returning life.

As they rounded the bend in the creek below where the pond had been, Nactee splashed with his paddle-flat tail, shoving the young she ahead of him toward the snow-drifted shoreline.

Nightfall found them huddled together in the crevice of a cutbank at the water's edge, munching the bark from a three-foot elm log that had drifted downstream with the debris. Above them the howling wind sent its icy blast lashing under the bank to make them shiver. The old buck thought of the comforting warmth of the lodge that had been dynamited from the water.

The sleek young she huddled closer to Nactee, fearful eyes seeking through the darkness when a wolf pack cut loose its weird hunting cry up the mountain slope.

A white-tailed doe broke from the manzanita thicket and crashed down the slope, running frantically, and the wolf pack lifted its voice to a higher pitch. The deer splashed across the creek and disappeared in the brush.

The leader of the wolf pack leaped over the cutbank, sniffing the ground for scent. He quartered the ground, and the two homeless beavers saw

him when he splashed into the shallows among the ice floes and lifted his head to peer into the crevice where they huddled.

Immediately he forgot the young doe and sprang toward Nactee and the young she. His head appeared in the cavern, vicious fangs snapping at the buck beaver.

Nactee struck back at the snarling face with his foreclaws. His sharp bark-cutting teeth snapped at the wolf's nose, neatly nipping off the end of it. The wolf cut loose a howl of rage and pain, sprang backwards. Both beavers leaped from their hiding place, diving into the icy water, splashing, just as the rest of the wolf pack cleared the cutbank, snapping at their big flat tails.

Nactee and his mate dove, swimming strongly downstream, while the wolf pack plunged through the shallows, yapping in their wake.

The shadows lengthened. The night was silent again except for the exploding of frozen trees up the mountain slope or the occasional yapping of a coyote on the lower reaches of the creek.

The old buck swam along beside the young she beaver, while snow flurried down from the slatey skies, growing steadier and more blinding.

Daybreak found Nactee and his mate far downstream from the scene of the dynamiting, but the day brought the two beavers no comfort. For it was cold in the water and freezing on the shore, and the wind blasted at them down the icy mountain slopes, causing them to long for the comfort of a warm lodge in a pond well-stocked with tender young logs and bark aplenty.

SOME dormant primeval instinct awakened in Nactee, arousing him to the realization that life depended on getting out of the mountains, down to a warmer climate where he and his mate might find the weather suitable for building purposes.

That day, they took time out to gnaw at the bark of frozen trees along the shoreline, but most of the time was spent in the water splashing steadily downstream. For they were guided by the instinct that told them the shortest route down to the lowlands which, of course, was the stream they followed.

Night came early in the mountains, with the opaque, snow-laden clouds seeming to drop a little lower over the peaks, like a huge blanket that brought stygian darkness over the slopes.

Nactee suddenly heard an angry roar downstream. The creek swirled madly along jagged boulders, splashing into the foam that froze almost instantly to anything it touched. Ice floes crashed and banged against ice-coated rocks that stood like ghostly sentinels in the stream. The current became treacherous, with undertows and whirlpools, roaring on downstream toward the waterfall.

The wise old buck beaver knew the danger of the waterfall. He darted against the current, swimming toward the shore with his webbed feet and his big tail paddle. The young she turned to follow him. In front of her, an ice cake crashed into a jagged boulder, shattering with a roar like mountain thunder. Then, the big cake slid from the rock where the currents had launched it, straight toward the frantic young she beaver. She streaked for the depths, but too late to save herself. The ice splashed into the water above her. Swirled and twisted by the currents, the big floe banged against boulders on its way downstream.

Nactee dove, and then down there in the darkness below the surface, he saw the young she, unconscious, perhaps dead, for a thin trickle of blood trailed along behind her limp body, coloring the swirling water.

Nactee streaked toward her, but the current picked her up, sucked her on toward the thunder of the waterfall. An undertow took her down into the darker depths. For a moment, she whirled there, a shadowy silhouette, then she disappeared, sucked on toward the cascades as though jerked by an invisible string.

The old buck put all his strength into the lunge that took him toward the spot where she had vanished. He darted aside when a rock wall loomed up in front of him. Now, he felt himself propelled over the lip of the fall, the weight of the thundering water at his back.

Frantically, he tried to reverse himself, but he plunged onward, with the thunder all around him in the foaming water.

Suction carried Nactee out into the rapids below the falls. He saw a dark head bob to the surface. His tail paddle splashed, driving him strongly on toward the form that showed there on the frothy surface for a moment. Then, he had the young she beaver in his jaws, tenderly, driven by some intuition that warned him she must live to mother the young of the new lodge somewhere in the wilds of the lower reaches.

Below he heard the mighty roaring thunder of the other falls. He turned toward the frozen shore, bearing his burden, and reached the temporary safety of the red granite wall of the gorge through which the stream swirled and boiled.

A thousand feet above, Nactee saw the rimrock, and for a time he rested beside his unconscious companion on a shelf above the water.

When the young she stirred slowly with returning life, Nactee nosed her gently. She responded with a snarl and snap of her sharp, tree-cutting teeth. The old buck slapped with his tail, and she got to her feet, still dazed and shaken, but with life pouring back into the bruised young body.

LATER, they began climbing the red granite wall together, for they found it expedient to make a portage here and take to the timbered country around the cascades.

When the two beavers reached the jagged wilderness country above the gorge, Nactee led the way. Strange, wild scents came to him, some of them terrifying. He caught the scent of stalking cougar and recognized it for what it was.

Crouched low on the ground among frosted rocks, Nactee and his mate lay hidden downwind from the tawny mountain cat who passed stealthily on great padded feet along a game trail that wound and twisted along the canyon rim. Once the great cat paused and looked over his shoulder as though warned by instinct that the eyes of the two small creatures of the wilds watched him fearfully.

A tree exploded somewhere up on the slope, and the cougar leaped, startled, and sprang away in the darkness.

Daybreak found the two beavers well below the cascades, moving swiftly along a stream through a valley where the green winter grass showed in patches where the snow had melted. The old buck looked with approval at the tender young trees along the banks of the stream. He and his young mate paused to sample the tender bark, gnawing it away with their sharp teeth.

Nactee was suddenly startled as he heard the sound of horses aproaching the trail. He caught the dread tang of man. He snarled a warning to the young she for it had been men who had dynamited their lodges and wrecked their dam up there in the high mountain basin.

A group of horsemen, range-garbed, drew up at the creek bank, and allowed the horses to drink from the clear, cold mountain stream.

"Them danged squatters from the flats below have raised more cain with

beavers along this crick than all the cougars in creation have done to the livestock!" one of the riders, a gaunt, bearded old man, rumbled. "So, stop yore cussing them mountain cats and help figure out a way to beat the homestead law and oust them squatters from behind that barbed wire they've put around their apple orchard."

The range riders went their way, cussing, headed toward the upland trail.

Nactee and his mate knew only fear for the hated creatures that had blasted their lodges and wrecked their dam, but they could not distinguish the difference between the cowmen and the real culprits. So they edged through the underbrush along the creek, moving swiftly downstream, feeling the desperate urge to get away from all such creatures.

They paused for a moment in the underbrush and sadly viewed the dynamited lodges of another colony of beavers, and the scent of the hunters still hung heavily on the frosted ground, mingled with the dreaded odor of the nitrate in exploded dynamite that they had learned to fear. Driven by instinctive panic they rushed downstream.

Before nightfall, they left the valley and headed along the creek across a flatland country. On the left bank of the stream stood a cabin that hulked low and dark against a background of young apple trees planted in neat rows beyond a nice stand of willows along the creek bank.

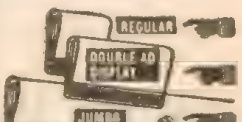
NACTEE lifted his nose and caught the faint tang of the two hunters who had dynamited his lodge and dam. There was nothing he wanted more than to move on with his young mate to some distant country, safe from the hated creatures who had murdered his colony of beavers. As he gazed downstream he saw only a flat grass country, a range dotted with

ONLY 29¢ EACH
NEW SILK FINISH
ENLARGEMENT
GOLD TOOLED FRAME
Beautiful 5 x 7 enlargement made from your favorite snapshot, photo or negative and mounted in a handsome gold tooled frame. Be sure to include color of hair, eyes and clothing for complete information on having your enlargement beautifully hand colored in oil. SEND NO MONEY—simply pay postman 29c each for the enlargement and frame plus cost of mailing. Satisfaction guaranteed. Limit two to a customer. Originals returned with your enlargement. Offer limited to U.S.A.
HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS
7021 Santa Monica Blvd., Dept. B-14, Hollywood 38, Calif.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years
Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. HA-58, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Be a DETECTIVE
A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!
Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL
1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 196 Washington 18, D. C.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?
Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men
In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.
FREE BOOK

MAKE EXTRA MONEY
EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES
No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles — Double Books — Jumbo Books — nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.


SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-651, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

LEARN AT HOME
TO BE A PRACTICAL NURSE
You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates
HIGH SCHOOL NOT REQUIRED
52nd year. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women, 18 to 60. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan.
CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 424, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name.....
City.....State.....Age.....

Hola, Folks! Here's Some Grand Reading for You!

THE RIDERS OF CARNE COVE

A Novel by **Wayne D. Overholser**

•

WEST OF WINDIGO

A Novelet by **Norrell Gregory**

•

HIGH MOON KILL

A Story by **William Hopson**

•

Plus yarns by **JOSEPH CHADWICK, ALLAN R. BOSWORTH, HAL G. EVARTS** ***and many others***

•

ALL IN THE BIG 160-PAGE 1951 EDITION OF

TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL

•

JUST OUT—25c AT ALL STANDS!

cattle in a climate milder than the one he and his mate had left in the mountains. Yet not a tree could he see in that vast range country. Instinct told him to move on.

The wind suddenly shifted and Nactee again caught the scent of the dreaded hunters. He sniffed the air and decided the scent was old and weak. The river squatters had been gone several days on their hunt in the mountains. The sight of the young apple orchard decided him. He turned toward it deliberately and the young she followed him.

That night when the moon and stars came out from behind opaque clouds, the two beavers were busily at work by the silvery light, gnawing down the apple trees and cutting them into three-foot logs.

Being the master builders they are, they built their skidroads and worked the logs into the creek, sinking them to the bottom of the stream, anchoring them there. With twigs and mud they constructed a dam around the logs, weaving the twigs together in workmanlike manner, caulking up the cracks with mud that they carried in their jaws up from the bottom.

Day after day, night after night, they worked industriously building the dam and lodge that would be their new home when the pond lifted behind the dam.

Within a week, they saw the dam completed, and they watched the water rise behind the barrier, flooding across the lowlands. Their labors were successful, for the pond built up around the cabin, lifting it from its foundations to slide deeper into the channel.

A few days later when they decided all was well, they began sliding up and down the north bank of their pool, splashing into the water playfully. The young she chased Nactee across the pond, nipping playfully at him when he dove to get away from her. When the old buck turned and

tried to chase her to the other end, she slapped him with her paddle tail and drove him back for the moment. Suddenly, they paused in their play, alerted to the unmistakable sound of shod hooves coming down the trail from the uplands.

To their noses came the dreaded scent of the hunters who had dynamited their dam and wrecked their lodges up there in the high mountain basin.

Nactee looked and saw three pack mules strung along ahead of the two horsemen. He sniffed the air and caught the tang of beaver pelts coming from the packs on the backs of the plodding mules, mingled with the odor of exploded dynamite. Instinctively, he knew that danger again threatened him and his mate.

Together, the two beavers dove into the pond, going deeper underwater without leaving a ripple on the surface. They found the underwater entrance to their lodge and scampered

[*Turn page*]

Look Forward to

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL OF OLD OKLAHOMA

BRANNIGAN

by

CHUCK MARTIN

BE AN ARTIST

Draw for Money—Learn in Spare Time

Commercial Art, Designing, Cartooning—all in one complete course. Trained Artists are capable of earning $65, $80 and more a week. No experience necessary. We teach step-by-step. Our famous method has trained thousands since 1914. TWO ART OUTFITS furnished. Low tuition, easy terms. Course G. I. Approved.

MAIL COUPON FOR FREE BOOK

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART
Studio 664A, Washington 5, D. C.

Name.....

Street..... Age.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

New FALSE PLATE for OLD IN 24 HOURS

Low As Only $15.95

***Wonderful New Scientific Method Transforms OLD, LOOSE, Cracked or Chipped Plates Into* LUSTROUS BEAUTY-PINK DUPONT PLASTIC PLATES**

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Why envy beautiful false teeth of others? We will transform your old, loose, cracked or chipped plate into a beautiful new, lightweight DuPont Beauty-Pink Plastic Plate, using your own teeth. All missing and broken teeth matched and replaced. Your cost amazingly low; actually save many dollars. No impressions needed under our new scientific False Plate Method. 24-Hour Service.

SEND NO MONEY Enjoy life again, and save money on beautiful, new, natural-looking plastic plate. Rush name, address for full details sent FREE. If your plate is *loose*, we show you how to make it comfortable, tight-fitting before duplication.

West Dental Laboratory, 127 N. Dearborn St., Dept. H-45, Chicago 2, Ill.

RUPTURE

RELIEF...OR YOUR MONEY BACK

Simple, easy to wear truss made by old surgical house. You risk nothing. Write for free booklet. Don't delay.

WEB TRUSS CO. Dept. TF-6 Hagerstown, Md.

QUIT TOBACCO!

Remove all tobacco craving safe in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe, reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.

GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. TF Ft. Worth 3, Texas

MAKE MONEY with FREE STOCKING

Amazing nylons replaced free if they run or snag within guarantee period! Not sold in stores. Big money, full or spare time, writing orders. No experience needed. FREE stocking and money-making outfit.

KENDEX CORP. BABYLON 243, N. Y.

SEE the World in Pictures

in America's Most

ENTERTAINING

Picture Magazine!

NOW ON SALE—ONLY 15c AT ALL STANDS!

Get Your Copy of the Gala 160-page 1951 Edition of—

ROMANTIC WEST ANNUAL

Featuring FLAME OF SUNSET,

A novel by L. P. HOLMES

plus

Stories by Oscar Schisgall, Frank C. Robertson, Monty Castle and Others!

NOW ON SALE—25c AT ALL STANDS!

inside, swimming up to the shelf they had built above the water's level. There, they huddled together, trembling with fear. Through their minds flashed the memory of the other fearful day when these same creatures had blown apart the lodge in which they sought safety. Now, through the top vent of the lodge, they caught those strange sounds made when men talked, their voices filled with fury.

Another sound came to the two trembling beavers, that of shod hooves coming from the valley. One of the hunters up there said gruffly, "It's old Gus Baxter and his Bar-B boys. They'll be wild when they see the beaver pelts we've got in them packs!"

His words were cut short by the sound of thunderous rifle fire. Other guns spoke, then there was silence, to be broken suddenly by the sound of the voice of one of the cowmen as he spoke harshly.

"There ain't no homestead law that allows settlers to dynamite beavers! By the time you two hellions git through doin' time, the grass will be growed up green again where you done your plowin', and that cabin out there in the beaver pond will be torn apart and used to build a stronger dam than the one they've got now."

Another voice lifted, filled with relief. "They've done it, Gus—got rid of the squatters and their danged trees. I wish you'd look at the waters backed over the lower flats!"

Nacoochee and his young mate knew nothing about vengeance against the hated hunters, or the terrible retaliatory measures they had taken by gnawing down those young apple trees, which represented several years of labor to the dynamiters. They only knew that their dam was good and strong and that their lodge was safe and warm. So, when the hated men were gone, they surfaced and swam across the pond, no longer afraid. For they had found a place and built a home.

Outlaw Roundup

By Norman Renard

RUSTLING, banditry, murder and just plain cussedness had become so flagrant in Kimball County, Texas, by 1877, that Major John B. Jones of the Frontier Battalion decided to do something about it—but quick!

His plan was to round up all suspicious characters in the county and herd them like cattle into a natural corral between the Llanos and Johnson's Fork just outside the cowtown of Junction. There the Rangers would "cut" the bad characters from the good, and the former held for trial.

The arroyos, draws and hills were literally crawling with bandits, cutthroats, rustlers and escaped convicts. As one ranger put it, Kimball County was a "theafs" stronghold and unsafe to travel through.

So desperate was the crisis, that the honest ranchers and working farmers were feverishly arming for the conflict which was long overdue. The outlaws, however, were well organized and had no fear of these law-abiding citizens, nor of the Rangers.

But neither were the Rangers afraid of them. Flushed from their hideouts, the badmen ran before the white-hatted lawman like frightened quail. Unfortunately, there were a number of good men as well as bad caught in that giant net, but they were released as soon as they were identified. The remaining badmen were then held for trial.

Thus was broken the back of organized crime in that area of Texas. And not one drop of blood was shed!

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Many Swedish Massage graduates make big money! Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. Prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE!

The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 163G 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

SUIT YOURS AS A BONUS

AND BIG MONEY IN SPARE TIME, TOO

We want you to wear this fine made-to-measure suit! Make it yours by sending a few orders, and earn BIG CASH PROFITS in spare time. Your suit will help you get more orders with over 100 rich, quality fabrics, tailored-to-measure to newest styles. Also Ladies' Tailored Suits—complete line. Write today for FREE SAMPLES. No experience, no money needed. For quick action tell us about yourself. **J. C. FIELD & SON, Inc.**
Harrison and Throop Sts., Dept. U-1877, Chicago 7, Ill.

FISTULA

FREE BOOK — Explains Dangers of Associated Ailments

Piles, Fissures and Rectal Abscess are common ailments that may also be associated with neglected Fistula. Our new 164-page illustrated book sent FREE. Write today — McCleary Clinic & Hospital, 697 Elms Blvd., Excelsior Springs, Mo.

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. **Sent on Trial!** Write NOW for free Booklet and **Proof of Results.** All correspondence confidential.
Brooks Company. 183-K State St., Marshall, Mich.

TAKE HIGH SCHOOL AT HOME

WRITE FOR FREE BOOKLET

You need a high school diploma to get ahead! Earn yours *in months* thru home study. Equals resident work. Saves time. College prep. Texts supplied. Credit for work elsewhere. Easy terms. *Write today!*

COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE
1400 Greenleaf, Dept. H16-6, Chicago 26

Advertising BOOK MATCHES

SPOT CASH PROFITS . . . REPEATS

World's Largest Direct-Selling Book Match Manufacturer offers you big opportunity in profitable year 'round business. Make money with MATCHCORP 20, 30, 40 and 240-light book matches. Low prices for high quality. Repeats. Full or part time; men, women. NOTHING TO BUY, giant 250-page catalog and other catalogs furnished plus selling information.

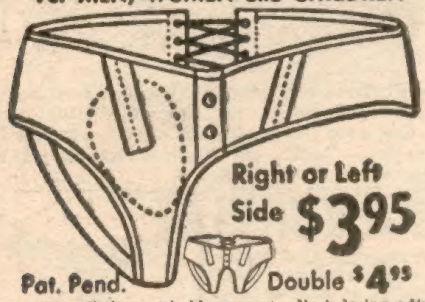
Get started right away—WRITE TODAY!
MATCH CORPORATION OF AMERICA
3433-43 W. 48th Pl. Dept. TG-61 CHICAGO 32, ILL.

Your Daily Horoscope in Every Issue of
EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY
☆ *Now on Sale — 25c at All Stands* ☆

SLEEP LIKE A TOP WITH
ASTHMADOR
The soothing medicated fumes of Dr. R. Schiffmann's ASTHMADOR relieve the choking agony of bronchial asthma. You breathe more easily—sleep better. Use ASTHMADOR anytime—powder, cigarette or pipe mixture—whichever is most convenient. At all drug stores in U.S. & Canada.
DR. R. SCHIFFMANN'S
ASTHMADOR

BE A DETECTIVE
WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

AMAZING COMFORT — NO SPECIAL FITTING
RUPTURE-EASER
For MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



Right or Left Side $3.95
Pat. Pend. Double $4.95
A strong, form fitting washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after operation support. Mail orders give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen. Specify right or left side or double. We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s.
Over 200,000 Satisfied Users!
10 Day Trial Offer
Money-back guarantee if you don't get blessed relief
Delay may be serious — ORDER TODAY!
PIPER BRACE CO.
308 E. 12th Dept. TF-61 Kansas City 6, Mo.

Free Yourself
FROM
Tobacco Habit
If you want to stop smoking and just can't, try world-famous NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how quickly NO-TO-BAC may help stop your craving for tobacco. Don't wait! Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC, for 7 days supply. If you can quit for 7 days, you've won half the battle. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write:
NO-TO-BAC CO.
DEPT. S, HEWLETT, NEW YORK

Answers to Questions on Page 83

1. A brushpopper was a cowboy who rode in brushy and thorny country and who, having learned the unlikelihood of finding an easy spot to slip through, had learned to hit the brush at full gallop and "pop" a hole right through for himself. And many a man lost an eye doing it.

2. Dolly Welter was the cowboy's corruption of the Spanish dar la vuelta, which meant to take a turn around the horn. This was later shortened to the familiar "dally."

3. Mares are considered more unruly, temperamental and flighty than geldings and are apt to communicate this rebellion to the other horses. They are full of notions and if they get a notion to go somewhere else, all the other horses will go along too.

4. The "opera house" was the top rail on the corral fence from which the cowboy watched, and applauded, his friends' adventures with bucking horses and similar hazards of ranch life. It was a front seat at some very exciting shows.

5. A cowboy who was set down was set afoot. A man who was fired from a job and who had no horse of his own was nearly always loaned a horse to get to town. If there was enough bad feeling so that the rancher refused him a horse it was considered a very serious matter, sometimes leading to gunsmoke.

Answer to Problem on Page 137

The cook warmed the bit at the fire. Ever touch a piece of metal on a cold day and have it burn you? Well, a horse doesn't want that metal bit shoved into his tender mouth when it is very cold. It can easily stick to the skin and tear it. Most cowboys warm the bit first, and this horse was smart enough to hold out for that little extra attention.

Missing Page

Inside back cover

Missing Page

Back cover